

Textile Mediation in Late Byzantine Visual Culture

Unveiling Layers of Meaning through the Fabrics of the Chora Monastery

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From Medium to Mediator

Textiles have been used to transform human experience, expression, and communication throughout history and across different cultures, and their uses have ranged from clothing, housing, and furniture to the transportation of people, goods, and ideas. Their versatility renders them exceptionally powerful media: material for the production of new entities and the dissemination of messages. Consequently, textiles function as instrumental cultural mediators, facilitating and regulating people's interactions with each other and with their surroundings. Indeed, given their adaptability and omnipresence, textiles can be said not only to mediate culture but to be emblematic of mediation itself.

In this essay, I propose that exploring the draped universe of Byzantium through the lens of mediation allows us to unveil layers of meaning that otherwise might remain hidden to our eyes.¹ Giving careful consideration to the mediative function of Byzantine fabrics reveals important dimensions of their cultural significance. To drive this point home, I will examine the possible meanings of textiles spread across

architectural structures depicted in late Byzantine religious paintings. Such representations of textiles are prominent in the surviving visual record but remain understudied in scholarly literature.² I will use the mosaics and wall paintings of the Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii) in Constantinople as a case study to examine this topic within the context of a well-researched monument. To provide a broader cultural framework for the examples from the Chora, I will first discuss the perception and use of textiles as mediators in the Christian culture of Byzantium more broadly. I will begin with some general observations about the material properties of fabrics.

Textiles as Physical Mediators

The mediative function of textiles is rooted in their physical characteristics.³ Their malleability confers upon them exceptional adaptability and versatility. Textiles perform like an elastic interface that provides both structure and flexibility, allows for both separation and contact, and functions as both a boundary

1 I borrow the expression "draped universe" from an article that has inspired my approach to textiles, although it does not discuss Byzantine material: L. Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World: Papers from a Colloquium in Memory of Richard Ettinghausen, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2–4 April 1980*, ed. P. P. Soucek (University Park, PA, 1988), 25–49.

2 See n92 below.

3 Many of the observations in this section are based on common quotidian experiences that do not require documentation. In recent decades, the study of textiles has produced a wide range of publications that touch upon a number of these issues. My references to such material will be very selective. A good starting point is A. B. Weiner and J. Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, DC, 1989), esp. the editors' introduction (1–29).

and a permeable membrane. Consider, for example, the way clothes mediate between bodies and their environment: they cover and reveal; they shelter and they bare; they regulate access, visibility, and exposure to the elements and to touch. They can become a second skin and wear the wearers as much as they are worn by them.⁴ In a similar manner, veils that mark passages and other liminal spaces, or cover and honor precious objects and bodies, demarcate points of transition and of privileged access. Rather than negating availability, they promise diverse possibilities of experience: they regulate movement and interactions in time and space through their malleable materiality, iconography, and use.⁵

In addition, textiles have a multisensory presence that enriches their dynamic mediation, as they engage at least four of the five bodily senses. They capture the eye with their colors, patterns, and shapes. They announce their presence through sound, from the sonorous effects of specific fabrics when the wearer moves, to the flapping of flags and veils in the wind. In addition, textiles absorb liquids and odors, preserving the olfactory identity and memory of a particular body or space.⁶ Finally, their pliability enhances their palpable and haptic effects, creating diverse sensations depending on their material and texture.

Due to their absorbent, malleable, and palpable second-skin nature, textiles are particularly effective mediators in interactions that are centered around

contact, transmission, and connection. For example, fabrics dedicated by devotees as honorific coverings of sacred objects and spaces (such as icons, relics, altars, and liturgical vessels) function as a material interface between the donor and the sacred entity, becoming the locus of their contact: they symbolize the perpetual presence and piety of the devotees and the continuous blessings they receive from the divine or the holy, through the privileged and unbroken connection that the textile realizes between them.⁷ Likewise, clothes worn by holy bodies become relics themselves, and

7 This relationship is implicit (or is explicitly expressed through surviving epigrams) in the dedications of icon veils in the Byzantine tradition: see V. Nunn, "The Encheirion as Adjunct to the Icon in the Middle Byzantine Period," *BMGS* 10 (1986): 73–102. For example, the donor might relate the color of the textile with both his/her identity and that of the holy figure depicted in the icon, and ask for protection in exchange for that precious dedication. One case in point is an epigram celebrating the donation of an *encheirion* by George Palaiologos to an icon of Mary: the textile is purple (πορφύρεον) because she is Queen, but we can also assume that the same color alludes to George's connections with the imperial Palaiologos family. Immediately after the reference to the purple color, the textile is said to be stained with the blood of George's heart: this reference seems to turn a metaphorical statement into a literal one, as it links the devotion of the donor to the color of the actual textile. In exchange for this precious and personal gift, George asks for Mary's protection (see the translation in Nunn, "Encheirion," 91). In such cases, the textile is presented as a powerful interface between the devotee and the holy; and if such an epigram was embroidered on the gifted fabric, then the textile's mediative function would be constantly recalled in the eyes of the viewers. The same wish for connection with the holy through the mediation of textiles is also at play in the dedication of liturgical veils that come into contact with the altar and the vessels of the Eucharist. The insistence of the sixth-century donor Sosiana that her silk clothes be turned into liturgical veils with her name and that of her deceased husband embroidered in gold (and not sold to provide money for the poor, as Bishop John of Ephesus suggested) probably hinged on her desire for proximity to and visibility within the sacred space of the sanctuary through the proxy of her clothing. The argument she used in supporting her wish was that she did not want her silks to end up in the hands of prostitutes, but it is reasonable to assume that Sosiana's wish for contact with the holy space of the sanctuary through her clothing was another (if not the main) reason for her insistence. In other words, she cleverly advocated for her own benefit while arguing that she was concerned about the fate of her pious gift. (The incident is discussed, with emphasis on Sosiana's expressed concerns about purity, by R. E. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity: Functions and Meanings of Silver Plate in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries* [Aldershot, UK, 2004], 69.) It is worthy of notice that through textile offerings Sosiana (and other women making similar donations) was allowed a special proximity to the altar, which was otherwise unavailable to her due to her sex. Note the similar arguments made by N. A. Lowe, "Women's

4 See the literature mentioned in nn14–15 below, which includes the ideological functions of clothes.

5 See, e.g., the range of interpretations discussed in the veiling of female bodies by F. El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York, 1999), and J. Heath, ed., *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics* (Berkeley, CA, 2008). For some relevant observations on Byzantine material see e.g. M. M. Fulghum, "Under Wraps: Byzantine Textiles as Major and Minor Arts," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 9, no. 1 (2001–2): 13–15, 19–20 (discussing textiles as "transitive"). On the late Byzantine *prokypsis* ceremony, which involved the ceremonial revelation of the emperor from behind veils, and comparisons with earlier imperial ceremonies involving curtains, see R. Macrides, J. A. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham, UK, 2013), 401–11. For a discussion of relevant visual evidence, see H. Maguire, "Art, Ceremony, and Spiritual Authority at the Byzantine Court," in *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture*, ed. A. Ödekan, N. Necipoğlu, and E. Akyürek (Istanbul, 2013), 111–21.

6 Consider Song of Solomon 4:11 ("And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon") in relation to verses 10–14, which are saturated with references to fragrances and spices.

cloth *brandeae* (pieces of fabric that come into contact with holy entities) turn into secondary relics that store and transfer blessings to the devoted bodies that handle them.⁸ This practice is already attested in Acts 19:12 in reference to Paul's healing powers: "Even the small towels and aprons that had touched his skin were taken to the sick, and their diseases were cured and the evil spirits left them." This passage creates a parallel between Paul and Christ by evoking one of the most powerful biblical tales of textile mediation, the miracle of the *haemorrhoussa* (the woman with the issue of blood):⁹ Christ's healing energy was transferred from his body (the veil of his divinity) to the clothes he wore, and from there to the ailing body of the woman (the veil of her soul) when she touched the hem of his garment.¹⁰ The catalyst of the miracle was the patient's faith, but the conduit of the healing energy was the textile between the two bodies.¹¹ That same miracle was evoked or explicitly mentioned in Byzantium when a textile in contact with a holy entity was involved in a miraculous healing.¹² Christ's Transfiguration provides another biblical example of textiles sharing in the qualities of the entities they touch: the transformation of Christ's clothing into a shining white glow, as if dematerialized into light, revealed to human eyes the divinity that was veiled behind the fabric of his human body. The

brightness of his clothes thus became a common feature in Byzantine representations of the Transfiguration.¹³

Textiles as Ideological Mediators

The physical characteristics discussed above, combined with the ability to accommodate an endless variety of patterns through weaving, dyeing, embroidery, printing, and sewing techniques, render textiles powerful ideological mediators.¹⁴ Being wearable and portable media with numerous uses, they are instrumental in the presentation and dissemination of ideas, and in the construction, experience, and performance of sociocultural roles and values. Clothes can mediate the identity and status of the wearer: they structure, regulate, negotiate, and reinforce their self-definition and social identification.¹⁵ They operate as a complex visual code,

Devotional Bequests of Textiles in the Late Medieval English Parish Church, c. 1350–1550," *Gender and History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 407–29.

8 Nunn, "Encheirion," 84–85.

9 Matt. 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48.

10 I do not have in mind a specific text that draws this parallel, but I posit that many late antique and medieval Christians could have thought of this analogy. The idea of the body as the veil of the soul, which in the case of Christ is also the veil of his divinity, is very widespread in early Christian and Byzantine literature. For relevant references, see N. P. Constanas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations* (Leiden, 2003), 315–58.

11 For various analytical approaches to this miracle, many of which focus on the function of textiles, see B. Baert, ed., *The Woman with the Blood Flow (Mark 5:24–34): Narrative, Iconic, and Anthropological Spaces* (Walpole, MA, 2014).

12 Nunn, "Encheirion," 85 (healing performed by the veil of the icon of Christ Chalkites, twelfth century); R. Schroeder, "Prayer and Penance in the South Bay of the Chora Esonarthex," *Gesta* 48, no. 1 (2009): 43n61 (a woman with menstrual problems was cured after stealing a small rag from the body of the sainted fourteenth-century patriarch Athanasios, burning it and inhaling the fumes).

13 Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29. See L. Tack, "Cleansed in the Wine of the Passion: On the Role of Jesus' Garment in the Story of the Haemorrhaging Woman," in Baert, *Woman with the Blood Flow*, 51–80, esp. 53 for the Transfiguration. See also A. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography* (Crestwood, NY, 2005), esp. 164–65 for the white garments of Christ in Byzantine Transfiguration and Anastasis images.

14 For example, see J. M. Cordwell and R. A. Schwarz, eds., *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* (New York, 1979); Weiner and Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*. See also the following note.

15 For a useful overview of (mostly anthropological) scholarship on this subject, see El Guindi, *Veil*, 49–76 ("The Anthropology of Dress"). On medieval (mostly western European) material, see F. Piponnier and P. Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages* (New Haven, CT, 1997), esp. chaps. 6–9; S. Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York, 2001); E. J. Burns, "Why Textiles Make a Difference," in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. J. Burns (New York, 2004), 1–18 (6 for references to further literature). F. Pritchard, "The Use of Textiles, c. 1000–1500," in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, ed. D. Jenkins (New York, 2003), 355–77, provides a broad overview of furnishing and clothing textiles in both practical and ideological (status-related) terms. For the Byzantine material, see especially the work by M. G. Parani, for example: "Byzantine Bridal Costume," in *Δώρημα: A Tribute to the A. G. Leventis Foundation on the Occasion of Its 20th Anniversary*, ed. A. Serghidou (Nicosia, 2000), 185–216; "Cultural Identity and Dress: The Case of Late Byzantine Court Costume," *JÖB* 57 (2007): 95–134; "Look Like an Angel: The Attire of Eunuchs and Its Significance within the Context of Middle Byzantine Court Ceremonial," in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou, and M. Parani (Leiden, 2013), 433–63; "Dressed to Kill: Middle Byzantine Military Ceremonial Attire," in Ödekan,

transmitting messages about one's geographic, ethnic, and cultural origin, as well as age, gender, sexuality, marital status, profession, religion, class, and social status, or even personal ideological beliefs, aesthetic values, and group affiliations. The color, style, fit, and condition of clothes (from clean and tidy to dirty and unkempt) can even transmit information about one's emotional state, health, and personal history. For example, in Byzantine art, demoniacs are usually depicted naked or wearing rugs, thus being identified as marginalized and antisocial beings: their lack of appropriate clothing signals their lack of appropriate social identity.¹⁶

Such versatile and fundamental mediation of identity through dress code is clearly reflected and further promoted by the significant role of clothing in well-known biblical stories. The most obvious example is Adam and Eve's transition from nudity to fig leaves and finally to animal skins as emblematic of their fallen state.¹⁷ The Byzantine iconography of the Anastasis (Resurrection) adds woven robes to this wardrobe, elevating the first parents to a redemptive state as Christ saves them from the realm of death.¹⁸ Joseph's multi-colored tunic is another significant biblical example.¹⁹ A special gift from Jacob, the garment honored Joseph and set him apart from all his brothers as the favorite son. The siblings' jealousy was manifested not only on Joseph's body, which was sold into slavery, but also on his tunic as a second skin: sprinkled with the blood of a goat, it was presented to Jacob so that he would assume

his son was killed by wild beasts. Fooled by this ploy, Jacob tore his own clothes in grief and replaced them with a sackcloth as a sign of mourning.²⁰

In Byzantine culture, proper dress codes were very important in all social interactions, including imperial ceremonies and church rituals. Clothing was extensively used to articulate hierarchical relations of power and symbolic associations with the divine and the holy, as is amply attested by textual and visual sources.²¹ In addition to being signs of social identity and status, clothes were also signifiers of one's moral standing and spiritual disposition. Following the biblical description of moral transitions in terms of putting on or taking off different physical or spiritual robes, Byzantine authors would often employ clothing metaphors to indicate the state of one's soul, with nudity or specific dress codes having positive or negative connotations depending on the context.²² For example, sinfulness could be described as dark attire, and virtue as bright; only those wearing the latter would be worthy of the honor to stand in front of and venerate holy figures (in analogy to those who must be appropriately clothed for an imperial audience).²³

Necipoğlu, and Akyürek, *The Byzantine Court*, 145–56; “Encounters in the Realm of Dress: Attitudes towards Western Styles in the Greek East,” in *Renaissance Encounters: Greek East and Latin West*, ed. M. S. Brownlee and D. H. Gondicas (Leiden, 2013), 263–301.

16 See the healing of various demoniacs (wearing only loincloths) in Pantokrator 61, fol. 144r, Paris. gr. 510, 170r, and Laurent. plut. 6.23, fol. 16v, reproduced in L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York, 1999), figs. 22, 173, 174; and the Healing of the Demoniacs of Gadara (entirely naked), in Iveron 5, fol. 35r, discussed by G. Galavaris, *Ζωγραφική Βυζαντινών Χειρογράφων* (Athens, 1995), 251, fig. 179.

17 Gen. 3:7–11, 21. For a systematic study of the meaning of clothing in the Bible, see E. Haulotte, *Symbolique du vêtement selon la Bible* (Paris, 1966), and, more recently, A. Cras, *La symbolique du vêtement dans la Bible: Pour une théologie du vêtement* (Paris, 2011).

18 For the iconography of the Anastasis, see A. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).

19 Gen. 37:3–4, 23, 31–34.

20 See Haulotte, *Symbolique*, 115–27, for biblical passages mentioning similar actions that signify grief through clothing.

21 Consider the importance of proper attire as described in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*: C. Angelidi, “Designing Receptions in the Palace (*De Cerimoniis* 2.15),” in Beihammer, Constantinou, and Parani, *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power*, 465–85. The description of proper attire is even more detailed in the fourteenth-century exposition on court ceremonial by pseudo-Kodinos: Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos*, 319–58. For priestly attire (and its rivalry with imperial dress), see W. T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon: Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford, 2012). See also A. Muthesius, “The ‘Cult’ of Imperial and Ecclesiastical Silks in Byzantium,” *Textile History* 32, no. 1 (2001): 36–47; eadem, “Textiles as Text,” in *Wonderful Things: Byzantium through Its Art*, ed. A. Eastmond and L. James (Farnham, UK, 2013), 185–202; and the articles by Parani mentioned in n15 above.

22 See M. Evangelatou, “Threads of Power: Clothing Symbolism, Human Salvation, and Female Identity in the Illustrated Homilies by Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos,” *DOP* 69 (2014): 266 (and n60), 276–79 for a relevant discussion and references to extensive literature.

23 See Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos (twelfth century), *Homilies* 2.4 (PG 127:573A), 2.13–14 (PG 127:588A), 3.2 (PG 127:600C–601A), 6.19 (PG 127:681A). Compare Tack, “Cleansed in the Wine of the Passion,” 52–53, where she mentions biblical and ritual examples that reflect the same idea of clothing as a marker of spiritual qualities (e.g., Jude 23 and the white robes of baptism).

One use of Byzantine textiles that is particularly relevant to the concept of mediation is the adornment of cities on the occasion of imperial visits or appearances.²⁴ Proper ceremonial attire mediates the ideology of an event by articulating the relationship, regulating the interaction, and embodying the respective status of all the parties involved. In the same way that participants in imperial ceremonies would wear appropriate attire, the urban space itself would be clothed with festive and luxurious textiles so as to act not only as the setting but also as a main participant in civic rituals. As the emperor performed his *adventus* (a ceremonial arrival to a city) or other public appearance, the textiles that defined his person and his entourage would be mirrored in the special fabrics spread over the city. In addition to honoring the ruler, such textiles would envelop the urban space with connotations of wealth, safety, and protection that stemmed from the emperor himself. In this manner, imperial power and control were inscribed onto the city: due to their material nature, time-specific display, and special iconography, these textiles could mediate concepts central to imperial ideology.

This dynamic ability of Byzantine textiles to act as mediators between different social actors in complex political contexts is also evident in what Anna Maria Muthesius calls “silken diplomacy.”²⁵ As precious diplomatic gifts, Byzantine silks assumed an

explicitly mediative function, and in this role they were particularly effective precisely because they were textiles: portable and adaptable, they embodied Byzantine sociocultural values through their precious material, quality, iconography, and prestige. At the same time, they could be adjusted to serve the needs of their new owners, thus accommodating the interests of both sides and functioning as powerful media of interaction and negotiation. In this respect Byzantine silks were themselves acting as ambassadors, working as polyvalent and dynamic facilitators of contact and exchange.²⁶

A significant example of the vibrant presence of fabrics in Byzantine culture and the rich Byzantine experience of textiles and *through* textiles is the prominent use of tents, which Margaret Mullett’s work has recently brought to scholars’ attention.²⁷ Tents were used mostly in military campaigns, hunting expeditions, and ceremonial occasions, and they were highly appreciated for providing security, mobility, and ample opportunities to display their owner’s high status.²⁸ Tents were spaces of interaction, including diplomatic meetings, and they were themselves offered as diplomatic gifts.²⁹ They could construct and speak of individual identities, and they were praised for their versatility and multivalence.³⁰ Indeed, we might say that Byzantine tents epitomized the intrinsic material qualities that make fabrics such powerful cultural mediators.

24 See M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (New York, 1986), 205–7; Fulghum, “Under Wraps,” 14; J. Shepard, “*Adventus*, Arrivistes and Rites of Rulership in Byzantium and France in the Tenth and Eleventh Century,” in Beihammer, Constantinou, and Parani, *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power*, 348–49, with further literature on the Bamberg Tapestry as a textile related to Byzantine imperial triumphs. See also Angelidi, “Designing Receptions,” 474–75n32 with further references. Angelidi also mentions the decoration of the palace with various precious silks and imperial garments on the occasion of important ceremonies (479 for a list of imperial garments displayed).

25 A. M. Muthesius, “Silk, Power and Diplomacy in Byzantium,” in *Textiles in Daily Life: Proceedings of the Third Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, September 24–26, 1992* (St. Paul, MN, 1993), 99–110. This idea is discussed further in the extensive corpus of this preeminent specialist of Byzantine silk textiles, including: “Crossing Traditional Boundaries: Grub to Glamour in Byzantine Silk Weaving,” *BMGS* 15, no. 1 (1991): 326–65; *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving* (London, 1995); *Byzantine Silk Weaving: AD 400 to AD 1200* (Vienna, 1997); *Studies in Silk in Byzantium* (London, 2004); *Studies in Byzantine, Islamic and Near Eastern Silk Weaving* (London, 2008).

26 For the diplomatic role of two surviving Byzantine textiles (one from the middle and one from the late period), see W. T. Woodfin, “Presents Given and Presence Subverted: The Cuneunda Chormantel in Bamberg and the Ideology of Byzantine Textiles,” *Gesta* 47, no. 1 (2008): 33–50; and C. Hilsdale, “The Imperial Image at the End of Exile: The Byzantine Embroidered Silk in Genoa and the Treaty of Nymphaion (1261),” *DOP* 64 (2010): 151–99.

27 M. Mullett, “Tented Ceremony: Ephemeral Performances under the Komnenoi,” in Beihammer, Constantinou, and Parani, *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power*, 487–513; eadem, “Experiencing the Byzantine Text, Experiencing the Byzantine Tent,” in *Experiencing Byzantium*, ed. C. Nesbitt and M. Jackson (Farnham, UK, 2013), 269–91; eadem, “Reading the Tent: Four Komnenian Byzantine Tent Poems,” in *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. T. Shawcross and I. Toth (Cambridge, 2018).

28 Mullett, “Tented Ceremony,” and eadem, “Experiencing the Byzantine Tent,” esp. 284–91.

29 Mullett, “Tented Ceremony,” esp. 489, 508, 511; eadem, “Experiencing the Byzantine Tent,” esp. 278, 280–81, 286, 290.

30 Mullett, “Experiencing the Byzantine Tent,” 286, 287–88.

Physical and Ideological Mediation: Textiles between Humanity and Divinity in the Christian Culture of Byzantium

According to Christian belief, after the separation of the creator and humankind caused by the Fall, the history of salvation unfolded as a long path toward the reestablishment of union and communion between God and his people. In the Old Testament, the space in which such communion could take place was the Tabernacle, the dwelling of the divine presence.³¹ The sacred locus of mediation between humanity and divinity was therefore defined by a textile tent, and within it by the sacred veil marking the entrance to the Holy of Holies. When the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem, that veil continued to play the same mediative role, both concealing and revealing the space of divine presence.³² In the New Testament, the locus of mediation became the body of Christ, who sprang forth from the body of Mary. Both were defined in terms of textile enclosure: the Virgin's body was the living Tabernacle that provided the material for Christ's body, the sacred veil torn on the cross to allow all believers access to the heavenly Holy of Holies.³³

31 Exod. 26, 33:7–10, 37:1–5.

32 2 Chron. 3:14.

33 For the Temple veil torn at the time of Christ's death on the cross, see Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45. For a short discussion of the symbolic and theological implications of this narrative, with references to previous scholarship, see M. Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh: The Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation," in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium: Studies Presented to Robin Cormack*, ed. A. Eastmond and L. James (Aldershot, UK, 2003), 263–65; eadem, "Threads of Power," 270n22. Among the literature cited, particularly relevant is H. Kessler, "Through the Temple Veil: The Holy Image in Judaism and Christianity," *Kairos* 32–33 (1990–91): 53–77, esp. 67–77. For Mary as the Tabernacle in the Byzantine tradition, see, for example, S. Eustratiades, *Η Θεοτόκος ἐν τῇ ὑμνογραφίᾳ* (Paris, 1930), 71–72 (σκηνή); J. Ledit, *Marie dans la liturgie de Byzance* (Paris, 1976), 77–78. Mary is often hailed as σκηνή (in the sense of Tabernacle and not simply tent) in the twelfth-century homilies of Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos, which also include a miniature of this Old Testament type of the Virgin, reproduced here as fig. 9 (Vatican, BAV, Vat. gr. 1162, fol. 133v; Paris, BnF, gr. 1208, fol. 181v). See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," fig. 24, 270n20, 281–82nn94–95. John 1:14 describes Christ's body as a tent that allows humans to see the glory of God—presumably a new Tabernacle housing the living law: "Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ."

Divinity dwelled in the Virgin's womb and was united with humanity in Christ's body. Therefore, the mystery of the Incarnation, and its reenactment in the mystery of the Eucharist, brought about not only reunion with God but also a communion of unprecedented intimacy between humanity and divinity that was unavailable before the Fall and conferred special honor and grace to humankind. Given the mediative and honorific potential of textiles, it is no surprise that this profound new relationship, localized in the bodies of Mary and Christ, was expressed through an array of clothing and veiling metaphors, images, and rituals. Following biblical and early patristic tradition, Byzantine authors regularly described human salvation in terms of clothing provided to Christians by Jesus and his mother: during baptism, neophytes were clothed with Christ (according to Paul's well-known statement in Galatians 3:27). When these spiritual robes of glory were torn through sinfulness, Byzantine Christians were encouraged to pray to Mary so that she could reclothe her devotees and envelop them in her protection.³⁴ In addition, Byzantine textual and visual sources and religious rituals were saturated with references to the Incarnation as the clothing of divinity in the mantle of humanity. Mary was perceived as the weaver of Christ's body: the purple thread she spun for the veil of the Holy of Holies during the Annunciation was a prominent symbol of the veil of flesh prepared in her womb for the advent of the heavenly king.³⁵ Similar uses of the veil as an evocative symbol of the Incarnation were also widespread in the Christian culture of western Europe. Like their Byzantine counterparts, such symbols were connected to ancient traditions (and medieval applications) of the idea of veils as vehicles of divine and royal or imperial revelation.³⁶

34 Ledit, *Marie*, 279–81. See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 277n60, for references to scholarship on the robes of glory (the clothing with Christ) related to baptism.

35 See especially N. P. Constatas, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh," *JEChrSt* 3, no. 2 (1995): 164–94, and a more extensive treatment of the same subject in idem, *Proclus*, 315–58. Also, Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh," and eadem, "Threads of Power," with references to further scholarship. See also Tack, "Cleansed in the Wine of the Passion," esp. 55–76, for the rich incarnational symbolism of the seamless tunic of Christ (John 19:23–24).

36 See Evangelatou, "Purple Thread of the Flesh," 264–65, with references to further literature, among which note H. Papastavrou, "Le voile, symbole de l'Incarnation: Contribution à une étude

The idea of Christ's body as the textile that both conceals and reveals his divinity was further reinforced by a number of traditions concerning his Incarnation through the Theotokos.³⁷ The following characteristic examples indicate the wide circulation of this idea in Byzantine culture. Christ miraculously imprinted his face on the *mandylion* (towel), the textile icon that mediated his divine power through material means, much as his body did. This concept of mediation was further amplified by the miraculous impression of the *mandylion* on the *ceramion* (tile), yet another divinely approved rendering of Christ's face. Both images served to sanction the use of icons as mediators between humanity and divinity.³⁸ In addition, both drew attention to the materialization of the divine through the Incarnation: the textile nature of the *mandylion* emphasized the clothing of the Logos in human flesh, while the clay of the *ceramion* evoked the earthly origin of his body, presenting him as a New Adam (compare Gen. 2:7). Traditions about other miraculous textiles related to the Incarnation abounded in Constantinople (which received the relic of the *mandylion* in the tenth century). The Virgin's *maphorion* (veil) and belt, which

had touched her holy body when it contained or nursed the Logos incarnate, were among the most sacred palladia of the city at least from the sixth century onward.³⁹ In the church of the Blachernai that housed the relic of the *maphorion*, the usual miracle performed almost every Friday from the eleventh century to at least 1204 consisted of the revelation of an image of the Theotokos and her child behind a miraculously lifted veil.⁴⁰ In the iconography of the Kykkotissa—based on the Marian icon of the Cypriot monastery of Kykkos, which seems to have originated in Constantinople—the Christ Child appeared clasping in his hand the veil of his mother or thrusting his arm through it, a reference to the human nature with which she veiled his divinity.⁴¹ In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the veil of the icon of Christ Chalkites performed a number of miraculous healings for members of the imperial family.⁴² And in the early fifteenth century, the emperor Manuel II Palaiologos is reported to have distributed small pieces of Christ's healing robe (worn at the time of the miracle of the *haemorrhoussa*) to various European dignitaries in exchange for diplomatic favors. It is possible that this relic had joined the other miraculous textiles of Constantinople at an earlier time.⁴³ In addition, liturgical veils and priestly robes structured and enhanced ritual mediation between the faithful and God in the mysteries of the Church, and wealthy individuals often donated icon veils or liturgical textiles to reinforce their bond with their holy protectors.⁴⁴ In the cultural context of Byzantium, the idea

sémantique," *CahArch* 41 (1993): 141–68, esp. 156–61; B. A. Sigel, *Der Vorhang der Sixtinischen Madonna: Herkunft und Bedeutung eines Motivs der Marienikonographie* (Zurich, 1977); J. K. Eberlein, "The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine Madonna," *ArtB* 65 (1983): 61–77, esp. 65–70, figs. 10–11. See also Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 180–81, with references to additional literature (esp. n86). See also H. Papastavrou, *Recherche iconographique dans l'art byzantin et occidental du XI^e au XV^e siècle: L'Annonciation* (Venice, 2007), 323–66.

37 Several of the following examples, in addition to others, are mentioned by Fulghum, "Under Wraps," 27–31, when she discusses textiles as "a transitive medium in a spiritual sense" (27).

38 See, for example, A. Lidov, "The Miracle of Reproduction: The Mandylium and Keramion as a Paradigm of the Sacred Space," in *L'immagine di Cristo dall'Acheropita alla mano d'artista: Dal tardo medioevo all'età barocca*, ed. C. Frommel and G. Wolf (Vatican City, 2006), 17–42. On representations of the *mandylion* as a symbol of the Incarnation in the decoration of the eastern part of Byzantine churches from the twelfth century onward, see S. Papadaki-Oekland, "Το άγιο μανδήλιο ως το νέο σύμβολο σε ένα αρχαίο εικονογραφικό σχήμα," *ΔΧΑΕ* 14 (1987–88): 283–96. See also Papastavrou, *Annonciation*, 136–43. For further literature on the *mandylion*, see G. Wolf, C. Dufour Bozzo, and A. R. Calderoni Masetti, eds., *Mandylium: Intorno al Sacro Volto, da Bisanzio a Genova* (Milan, 2004), and R. Calderoni Masetti, C. Dufour Bozzo, and A. G. Wolf, eds., *Intorno al Sacro Volto: Genova, Bisanzio e il Mediterraneo (secoli XI–XIV)* (Venice, 2007); A. Nicolotti, *From the Mandylium of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin: The Metamorphosis and Manipulation of a Legend* (Leiden, 2014).

39 For an overview with references to previous scholarship see S. J. Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion: The Earliest 'Life of the Virgin' and Constantinople's Marian Relics," *DOP* 62 (2008): 53–74. For a possible visual representation of these two relics (Mary's belt and veil) in the image of the Annunciation in the sixth-century Eufasian basilica in Poreč, see A. Terry and H. Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufasian at Poreč* (University Park, PA, 2007), 1:100–102, 133–36; 2: fig. 97.

40 See E. N. Papaioannou, "The Usual Miracle and an Unusual Image," *JÖB* 51 (2001): 177–88 and B. V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park, PA, 2006), 145–63.

41 A. W. Carr, "The 'Virgin Veiled by God': The Presentation of an Icon on Cyprus," in *Reading Medieval Images: The Art Historian and the Object*, ed. E. Sears and T. K. Thomas (Ann Arbor, 2002), 215–27. See also Papastavrou, *Annonciation*, 350–55.

42 Schroeder, "Prayer and Penance," 44.

43 Ibid., 45n71.

44 For liturgical textiles, see Woodfin, *Embodied Icon*. For the donation of icon or liturgical veils, see n7 above.



Fig. 1. Paintings along the left wall (when facing the altar) of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, showing painted textiles in the lower register and images of holy figures above, eighth century. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by domeniconardoza / Shutterstock.

of textiles as mediators between humanity and divinity was inescapable and would have deeply influenced both the representation and the interpretation of textiles in religious settings and biblical scenes.

One such case, recently studied by Alexei Lidov, is the representation of painted veils on the lower register of church walls in Byzantium and its periphery, as well as in Rome and other western European locations.⁴⁵ Two of the examples Lidov discusses are the eighth-century murals in Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome (fig. 1) and the thirteenth-century murals in the upper church of the Boiana Monastery outside Sofia, Bulgaria. Lidov suggests that these painted veils refer to the idea of the Christian church as a new Tabernacle and Holy of

Holies through which the faithful have access to God. He also argues that such allusions to those sacred Old Testament textiles ultimately refer to Christ's body. Indeed, in the Boiana wall painting, the inscription on the painted textile reads "curtain called the veil"—in other words, the *katapetasma* (καταπέτασμα) torn asunder at the time of Christ's death on the cross.⁴⁶ Lidov proposes that the depiction of such textiles on the bottom register of church walls informs the perception of the holy images painted above them: the textiles were meant to indicate that, like the Tabernacle or the Temple veil, icons also provide access to the divine.⁴⁷

46 Ibid., 107.

47 Ibid., 104, 107. See also T. E. A. Dale, *Relics, Prayer, and Politics in Medieval Venetia: Romanesque Painting in the Crypt of Aquileia Cathedral* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 66–76, esp. 73–76. He discusses fictive curtains painted in the lower register of church walls as allegorical veils that refer to the Old Testament as prefiguration of the New. He points out that the opacity and limited color range of these

45 A. Lidov, "The Temple Veil as a Spatial Icon: Revealing an Image-Paradigm of Medieval Iconography and Hierotopy," *Ikon* 7 (2014): 97–108. I thank Jelena Bogdanovic for drawing my attention to this article.

I would like to suggest that this mediative function is highlighted not only because of the role of the Tabernacle and the Temple veil but also because of the intrinsic function of textiles as physical and ideological mediators. After all, this was the primary reason for which they were used to structure and regulate human contact with God, both as the material fabric surrounding the Old Testament locus of divine indwelling and as a symbolic reference to the fabric of Christ's body, the New Testament locus of divine indwelling. In other words, the representation of painted fabrics below holy images indicates that icons, like textiles, are permeable membranes and dynamic interfaces between different realms, bringing into contact the earthly and the heavenly, the viewer and the viewed.

While exploring the prominent presence of painted and material textiles in Byzantine churches, it is also appropriate to consider what members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy thought about them, since they were daily participants in church rituals involving such textiles. In the fifteenth century, Symeon of Thessalonike had a lot to say about liturgical veils and priestly attire in his liturgical commentaries, which were heirs to a long and rich textual and ritual tradition.⁴⁸ His words may reflect interpretations that were in circulation among at least some members of the clergy and possibly also the laity in the late Byzantine period. I would like to draw particular attention to Symeon's discussion of liturgical textiles in terms of mystery.

When discussing the altar cloth, he writes that the altar "is covered and adorned by cloths because what is in it is *obscure and not comprehensible to all*."⁴⁹ It is possible that Symeon refers here to the different

degrees of understanding that the faithful can achieve depending on their education and involvement with the Church, suggesting that the priesthood is privy to a deeper insight into the mysteries of God; these degrees of understanding might even be analogous to the hierarchy of offices that would differentiate, for example, the comprehension of an archbishop from that of a deacon.⁵⁰ However, we shouldn't think that Symeon's comment is a one-dimensional and elitist statement that identifies concealment with exclusion and denial of access to those who do not comprehend; nor should we consider his reasoning as a *justification* of concealment meant to actively prohibit the faithful from understanding. Such readings of Symeon's statement would be anachronistic, as they reflect modern sensibilities and perceptions, such as contemporary ideas about democratic access and criticism toward the hierarchical structure of ecclesiastical establishments.

To appreciate the cultural nuances and to understand the rich and layered meaning of Symeon's reference to the altar cloth, one needs to pay close attention to his precise lexical choices and examine the passage in its broader context. The passage appears in conjunction with a discussion of the relics of martyrs under the altar (symbolizing the foundation of the Church on the blood of Christ and his martyrs), and the anointment of the altar with holy oil (through which the altar is imbued with the energy of the Holy Spirit).⁵¹ Both sacred entities (the relics and the holy oil) are present yet invisible when one looks at the altar (even when it is not covered with a textile). Therefore, the use of a precious textile as an altar covering becomes the visible sign of its invisible sacredness. The exact word Symeon uses to indicate those things that are "obscure" (in the English translation) is *dystheoreta* (δυσθεώρητα), literally "hard to see." Followed by the statement that the altar is "elevated and most splendid [literally "most luminous"] as the throne of God" (καὶ ἐπηρμένον δὲ καὶ λαμπρότατον, ὡς θρόνος Θεοῦ), the reference to *dystheoreta* can evoke the idea of divinity as not only incomprehensible but

curtains, compared with the full color of the figures in the images above, visualizes exactly this idea of Old Testament shadow (*umbra*) versus New Testament image (*imago*). I thank Rossitza Schroeder for drawing my attention to this publication.

48 See R. Taft, "Foreword," in *St. Symeon of Thessalonika: The Liturgical Commentaries*, ed. and trans. S. Hawkes-Teeples (Toronto, 2011), 1–14.

49 *Explanation of the Divine Temple* 21 (emphasis added), Greek text and English translation in Hawkes-Teeples, *Liturgical Commentaries*, 94–95: "ἀμφίοις δὲ περικεκαλυμμένον ἐστὶ καὶ κεκοσμημένον [τὸ θυσιαστήριον], ὅτι καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ δυσθεώρητα καὶ οὐ πᾶσιληπτὰ." I would like to thank Rossitza Schroeder for bringing this passage to my attention. Compare what Symeon says about the sanctuary doors closing after the Great Entrance (which he relates to Christ's Second Coming) and opening again: that Christ will be concealed to many and revealed gradually, and some (i.e., the priesthood) will

have greater access to him. *On the Sacred Liturgy* 137–38, in Hawkes-Teeples, *Liturgical Commentaries*, 250–51.

50 This would align with the fact that "one of Symeon's major preoccupations [in his liturgical commentaries] is that of rank and subordination," noted by Hawkes-Teeples in *Liturgical Commentaries*, 25.

51 *Explanation of the Divine Temple* 21, in Hawkes-Teeples, *Liturgical Commentaries*, 92–95.

also hard to see, either because of its blinding light (which shone through during Christ's Transfiguration) or because of its invisible, immaterial, spiritual nature. In both cases, it is the fabric of human flesh that transformed God the Logos from *dystheoretos* to visible, in analogy to the altar cloth that transforms sacredness from "hard to see" into "comprehensible to all" (πᾶσι ληπτά).⁵² In other words, I suggest that the veil as discussed by Symeon marks the altar's sacredness as both "hard to see" and "comprehensible" at the same time.

One way to evaluate Symeon's statement in its Byzantine cultural context is to read it through textile mediation, that is, the ability of textiles to regulate and facilitate access: clothes both veil and unveil, just as Christ's body both conceals and reveals his divinity. In terms of the mysteries of the Church, textiles introduce concealment as a reference to the unapproachable nature of the divine rather than the limitations of human comprehension. At the same time, through their ritual use, symbolism, and iconography, textiles also provide access: they facilitate a better understanding of the Incarnation both as a mystery and as the availability of God through Christ's bodily veil. Indeed, veiling something to demarcate it as a mystery, by limiting visual and physical access, can actually give it more visibility and prominence as a sacred entity, articulating its special character in clear and easily comprehensible terms. Veiling renders sacredness conceptually accessible, because it marks something as exceptional. Even when the veil is lifted, its presence signals the sacredness of the entity it alternately conceals and reveals. This function of revealing through veiling is central in the operation of the Tabernacle, the veil of the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple, and the *templon* screen of Byzantine churches, which gradually incorporated both veils and images that made visible, through textile and icon mediation, the mystery of the Incarnation enacted behind them during the Eucharist.⁵³ In

Byzantine culture, all of these veiling mechanisms of revelation were considered symbols of Christ's body, the ultimate revelatory veil of divinity, through which humanity is given access to heaven. It is worthy of notice that in his liturgical commentary Symeon returns to the idea of textiles as signs of mystery when he discusses the liturgical veils covering the body of Christ in its Eucharistic form: he considers those veils to reveal as they conceal, to reflect the fact that through Christ God became available but also remained incomprehensible and mysterious.⁵⁴ We see again how textiles can interweave references to Christ's two natures, his humanity and divinity, precisely because they are liminal entities that mediate between different realms and embody diverse potentials, transforming contradictory concepts into complementary possibilities (like veiling turned into unveiling, concealment becoming revelation). Therefore, textiles are particularly successful symbols of the Incarnation because they transfigure the complex concept of a human God into the comprehensible symbol of a woven interface, materially approachable yet conceptually inexhaustible, as palpable Christ and infinite Logos.

Symbolic Veils of Mediation: Considering the Role of Textiles in the Chora Monastery

The textual, visual, and ritual uses of Byzantine textiles discussed above are cases in which the cultural prominence of their mediative function is not only referenced and employed but also reinforced and consolidated. These examples are indicative but by no means exhaustive, and they suggest that textile mediation

52 Ibid., 94–95. Compare what Origen wrote (*Against Celsus* 6.69) when he specified that the Logos was *dystheoretos* as an image of his Father, therefore "[he became flesh] and made his dwelling among us [and we saw his own glory]" ("[Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο] καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, [καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ]"). Following John 1:14, this passage describes the body of Christ in terms of a textile tent, i.e., a tabernacle that he set up among us as his dwelling, so that we could see his divine glory.

53 See N. Constas, "Symeon of Thessalonike and the Theology of the Icon Screen," in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art*

Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West, ed. S. E. J. Gerstel (Washington, DC, 2006), 163–83.

54 *Explanation of the Divine Temple* 67, in Hawkes-Teeple, *Liturgical Commentaries*, 130–31: "Διὰ τί καλύπτεται τὰ θεῖα δῶρα ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ τραπέζῃ; Ἐπιτιθέμενα δὲ τὰ θεῖα δῶρα τῇ ἱερᾷ τραπέζῃ, καλύπτεται, α' ὅτι οὐ τοῖς πᾶσιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἐγνωσμένος ὁ Ἰησοῦς, καὶ β' ὅτι σωματωθεὶς, οὐδ' οὕτω τοῦ κρυφίου τῆς αὐτοῦ θεότητος καὶ τῆς προνοίας ἐξέστη. ἀλλ' ἀκατάληπτός ἐστι καὶ ἄπειρος αἰεὶ, καὶ τοσοῦτον μόνον γινώσκειται, ὅσον αὐτὸς ἀποκαλύπτει" ("Why are the divine gifts covered on the holy altar? When the divine gifts have been set on the sacred altar, they are covered 1) because Jesus was not recognized by all from the beginning, and 2) because, though incarnate, he did not thereby give up the hidden quality of his divinity or his foreknowledge, but is always incomprehensible and infinite, and is known only insofar as he reveals himself").

was a defining cultural factor in Byzantium. Keeping this in mind, I will now turn my attention to the possible interpretations of textiles spread atop or between architectural settings in late Byzantine religious paintings.⁵⁵ In order to pursue a systematic and contextual interpretation of such textiles, I will study their use in one specific monument: the fourteenth-century mosaics and wall paintings of the Chora Monastery in Constantinople.

My ultimate goal is to invite readers to think of various potential meanings of such textile representations in late Byzantine images, rather than to impose a rigid one-dimensional reading on them. It would be counterproductive to insist on a single semantic interpretation, given the rich multivalence of both textiles and symbols in Byzantine culture, which led to the fertile polysemy of textiles *as* symbols. It is especially important to bear in mind that the notion of symbols as one-dimensional straitjackets of meaning (often espoused in a contemporary Western context) is entirely distorting when imposed upon the medieval Christian cultures of either Byzantium or western Europe (and many other cultures around the world). To quote the prominent medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum, “Medieval symbols were far more complex—polysemic as anthropologists say—than modern people are aware . . . we might find in medieval art and literature some suggestion of a symbolic richness our own lives and rituals seem to lack.”⁵⁶ Likewise, anthropologist Douglas Davies, following the work of Victor Turner, speaks of “the multivocal or polysemic nature of symbols, where one meaning is related to others in an increasingly deep

pool of potential meanings available for exploitation by future interpreters.”⁵⁷ This cultural understanding and employment of symbols closely reflects the etymology of the Greek word that gave rise to the English term: *symbolon* (σύμβολον) can be understood both as something that is made out of contributing elements brought together in one unit, and as something that contributes to another unit beyond itself (especially in its active verb form *symbollo* [συμβάλλω]).⁵⁸ This is how symbols worked in Byzantium: they encompassed a wide range of meanings variously activated according to context and user, and thus they contributed to cultural interactions informed by those meanings. In other words, symbols were powerful cultural mediators, very much like textiles, which themselves functioned as multivalent symbols.

I will return to the notion of textile multivalence in the last part of this essay, but given the confines of the space available here, I will not attempt to explore a wide range of possible interpretations in my main text, nor will I be exhaustive in the analyses I pursue. For example, a meaning that I will not explore in detail but would be appropriate to consider in a more extensive study is that of *kosmos* (κόσμος). In Byzantium, this was a multivalent concept that referred to artful and precious objects and their intricate and masterful decoration, as well as to the dedication of such objects and the honor they bestowed upon the recipient (such as a saint, a church, or an icon).⁵⁹ *Kosmos* became a significant cultural practice among late Byzantine elites and it often involved the dedication of luxurious textiles to churches or to individual icons. Therefore, the concept of *kosmos* and any possible applications of it to the interpretation of the textiles spread across or on top of buildings in the Chora pictorial narratives should not be reduced to

55 I will not analyze the depiction of veils employed as curtains for doors and windows. See the scholarship by Papastavrou (n36 above) for a discussion of symbolic curtain veils in Annunciation images. In the present collection of essays, M. G. Parani, “Curtains in the Middle and Late Byzantine House,” *DOP* 73 (2019): 145–163 is relevant to this discussion: Parani notes that in the middle and late Byzantine period, curtains are prominent in imperial and ecclesiastical contexts and might also be present in wealthy households; in addition, they seem to be a common domestic furnishing in connection to bedrooms and especially marital beds. In view of this, we can hypothesize that curtains depicted on the building behind Mary in Annunciation images would evoke, among other things, not only imperial and ecclesiastical associations (i.e., Mary as queen of heaven, daughter of David, mother of the heavenly king; and Mary as Ecclesia), but also marital ones (Mary as the bride of God).

56 C. W. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1992), 116.

57 D. Davies, “The Evocative Symbolism of Trees,” in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, ed. D. Cosgrove and S. Daniels (Cambridge, 1988), 37, referencing the work of V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY, 1967).

58 LSJ, s.vv. συμβάλλω, σύμβολον. Compare Turner’s observation that “a dominant symbol is a *unification of disparate significata*” that possess “analogous qualities” general enough to allow them “to bracket together the most diverse ideas and phenomena.” Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, 28.

59 For the multivalent meaning and cultural prominence of *kosmos* in late Byzantium, see I. Drpić, *Epigram, Art, and Devotion in Later Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2016), 118–85. I thank my anonymous reader for suggesting I consider *kosmos* in my interpretation.



Fig. 2. Theodore Metochites presents the Chora Church to Christ, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Church (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by age fotostock / Alamy Stock Photo.

a facile definition of “adornment” according to contemporary Western notions of “superficial decoration.”⁶⁰ Ivan Drpić has masterfully discussed the multilayered significance of *kosmos* in late Byzantium and has helped us recognize its “protean” qualities in terms of both its remarkable flexibility of meaning and its formative role in defining the holy objects and entities enveloped in it. *Kosmos* as “elegant and orderly arrangement, decorative detail, exquisite craftsmanship and technical virtuosity, costly materials and sensual splendor” brought about

“completion, perfection, and fulfillment” to the objects and entities it enveloped.⁶¹ *Kosmos* was often used in a technical sense in late Byzantium to identify luxurious textiles decorated with golden embroidery, gems, and pearls, or costly icon revetments made of precious metals and gems, all of which manifested the status of the entities they enveloped, from aristocratic bodies dressed in sumptuous clothes to holy icons honored with artful and precious frames.⁶² In this sense, bright mosaics, colorful wall paintings, and polychrome marble slabs are the *kosmos* of the Chora church and parekklesion (funerary chapel). Likewise, the luxurious textiles donned by the patron Theodore Metochites and the saints depicted in the Chora—with their intricate and

60 Drpić, *Epigram*, does a superb job of illuminating the profound meaning of adornment in Byzantine culture. For a brief critical discussion of the contemporary Western notion of “superficial decoration” and its inadequacy when considering the role of adornment in other cultures, see M. Evangelatou, *A Contextual Reading of Ethiopian Crosses through Form and Ritual: Kaleidoscopes of Meaning* (Piscataway, NJ, 2018), 74–76. See also C. L. Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden, 2016).

61 Drpić, *Epigram*, 118–85, esp. 125, 142.

62 Ibid., 129–39, 167–78.



Fig. 3. Saint George(?), ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, B.F.S.1991.0353.

colorful patterns, gold bands, and even gems—are the *kosmos* of those figures (figs. 2–3).

By contrast, the much simpler textiles that are depicted atop buildings or spread between them in the Chora images are usually monochrome, though they may have a band of different color (sometimes of gold) or, in rare cases, gold tassels. These fabrics do not appear to fulfill the same role of *kosmos* in the technical sense of sumptuous and honorific adornment (compare the elaborate textiles of figs. 2 and 3 to the plain ones of figs. 18–35). We cannot deny that such textiles adorn and honor the buildings on or between which they are spread, or the people above whom they billow, at least in the scenes where such a role might be appropriate in terms of content and context. Yet, given their rather simple and unadorned visual characteristics, those fabrics seem intended to draw attention to their own materiality, their almost corporeal three-dimensional nature as articulated by their soft and voluminous folds—effects that would be lost under the repeated patterns of elaborate decoration. These fabrics lack the intricacy, sumptuousness, and decorative effect of the textile *kosmos* seen on the bodies of Metochites (fig. 2) and the Chora saints (fig. 3), and do not emphasize luxury in terms of preciousness and craftsmanship. In addition, these architectural textiles do not define the identity of the buildings and spaces they cover, unlike the defining role that decorative *kosmos* plays in manifesting the special status of the icons or bodies it honors, so inextricably integrated with their identity that, without their *kosmos*, those icons or bodies would be dishonored and denuded.⁶³

Yet, late Byzantine *kosmos* and the textiles spread across the architectural spaces depicted in the Chora may have a deeper affinity in their role as mediators of meaning: they are not superfluous add-ons but significant visual components.⁶⁴ Even if omitting the textiles from the Chora's Christological and Mariological scenes would not alter the identity of those compositions, I argue that the presence of these fabrics highlights the essence of the visual narratives by emphasizing the theme of human salvation through divine incarnation. The voluminous textile bodies draped on or between buildings, marking the space in which the lives of Mary

⁶³ Ibid., 143, 160–61, 178–85.

⁶⁴ Drpić describes the mediative and almost haptic function of *kosmos* in terms similar to my discussion of textile mediation. See *ibid.*, 143, 160–61.

and Christ unfold, remind viewers that through those two protagonists of Christian history the Logos (the Word of God) became not just audible but also palpable and visible through the body of Christ, the veil of human flesh woven by his mother. Through Christ's ministry, Passion, Resurrection, and Eucharistic incarnation, that same body became the fabric of human salvation, the shelter and protection for God's faithful followers. Furthermore, Christ's body became the fabric of human and divine communion: not only were divinity and humanity interwoven in Christ, but through his sacrifice on the Cross and on the church altar (his historical and Eucharistic bleeding), God and his people were reunited under the mantle of the Incarnation, like a long-separated parent and his children, who finally found their way back to each other. And because the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Eucharist and the resulting human salvation are pivotal manifestations of mediation between humanity and divinity, they could be aptly visualized through images of textiles, which are themselves mediators par excellence.

In the Chora pictorial narratives, the haptic materiality of the depicted textiles, and the way they often spread like canopies above people or link different buildings and parts of a composition, could allude to the notions of the Incarnation and its Eucharistic reenactment as mediation, salvation, protection, and reunion (for example, figs. 20–23 and 29–31). In this regard, what defines the textiles in the Chora pictorial cycles as *kosmos* is not so much specific notions of adornment or honor but their overall function as meaningful components in the visual narrative of human salvation. Contributing to the visualization of stories that held great importance for their Byzantine viewers, such textiles are part of the *kosmos* of the images, bringing forth the cosmic significance of pivotal moments in the history of human salvation according to the order and wisdom of divine providence.⁶⁵ In this reading, *kosmos*

articulates the deeper meaning of the visual narrative centered around the Incarnation of the Logos in the veil of human flesh.⁶⁶

In what follows, I will explore specific ways in which we can read the Chora textiles as symbols of the Incarnation. Without denying other possible meanings, I believe this interpretation to be particularly fruitful because of the undeniable centrality of the Incarnation in the Christian culture of Byzantium and the myriad ways in which textiles were used to refer to it.⁶⁷ The incarnation of God in Christ and the salvation of humanity brought about by the two main protagonists of the Incarnation, Mary and Jesus, are essential to the imagery of most if not all Byzantine churches decorated with wall paintings or mosaics (as exemplified by scenes from the life of the Virgin and of Christ and the figure of the Theotokos in the sanctuary apse).⁶⁸ Therefore, I believe that the prominent textiles spread atop or between architectural settings in late Byzantine paintings centered on the figures of Mary and Christ could have an incarnational symbolism.⁶⁹

The mosaics and wall paintings of the Chora church and parekklesion place special emphasis on the salvific character of the Incarnation in both visual and textual terms. This is done through the selection of scenes and their specific iconography, as well as through the accompanying inscriptions, which often

65 See *ibid.*, 125, for references of *kosmos* to the concept of order/*taxis* (which was of particular importance in Byzantine culture), and 143, 160–61, on the formative significance of *kosmos* in relation to the meaning of what it adorns. It is worth noting here that Symeon of Thessalonike describes the altar cloth in terms of *kosmos* (κεκοσμημένον, see n.49 above). In the context of his text, this term encompasses notions of adornment and honor but it also refers to the fact that the veil reveals the sacred nature of the altar (therefore the *kosmos* of the veil is essential to the meaning of the altar, as I have explained above).

66 As *kosmos* is not the focus of my attention, I do not presume that the above analysis is in any way conclusive or even satisfactory on the subject. Another article would be needed to discuss this issue adequately.

67 See especially nn.35–36 above.

68 The incarnational content of Mariological and Christological scenes is rather self-evident. On the theme of the Incarnation as expressed through the image of Mary as the Theotokos in the apse, see, for example, A. G. Mantas, *Το εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα του ιερού βήματος των μεσοβυζαντινών ναών της Ελλάδας* (Athens, 2001), 57–61.

69 Similar interpretations can be appropriate for the textiles that appear in scenes of saints' lives. As references to mediation, protection, and salvation, such textiles could underline the role of the saints as mediators between God and his people and as holy figures who toil for the protection and salvation of the faithful. Depending on the specific content and context of a given composition, a reference to the Incarnation as the revelation of God through the veil of human flesh might also be appropriate (as in representations of Evangelists composing their accounts of Christ's life). Of course, a case-by-case analysis of textiles depicted in specific contexts (e.g., within a composition, a narrative cycle, a monument, or a manuscript) is always necessary in order to understand the various meanings such textiles might have held.

quote biblical passages.⁷⁰ Even the name of the Chora Monastery (χώρα), meaning both “land” and “container,” highlights the concept of salvation through the Incarnation, both in relation to Mary as container of Christ and Christ as land of the saved. Scholars have long recognized the prominence of these ideas in the mosaics above the main doors of the outer narthex (figs. 4–5): the Virgin and Child with the inscription “ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρήτου,” meaning “Container of the Uncontainable,” faces Christ with the inscription “ἡ χώρα τῶν ζώντων,” or “Land of the Living.”⁷¹ The double dedication of the monastery to both Mary and Christ further emphasizes the concept of the Incarnation and of salvation.⁷²

There are a number of additional factors that indicate that Byzantine viewers of the fourteenth century would have paid attention to the textiles depicted in the Chora mosaics and wall paintings and would have considered them significant elements of the scenes’ overall message. The following observations suggest that the patron of the monastery and at least some of its early residents and visitors would have been quick to appreciate the cultural polysemy and prominence of actual and depicted textiles in the space of the Chora Monastery. Its patron, Theodore Metochites, was one of the most erudite and wealthy Byzantine men of his time and a key actor in imperial ceremonies as a high dignitary in the court. Indeed, his role was second only to that of the emperor when he was appointed *megas logothetes* by Andronikos II Palaiologos.⁷³ This emperor,

notably, “was known for his gifts of sumptuous ecclesiastical vestments and other textiles.”⁷⁴ In addition, Andronikos II was probably responsible for the construction or restoration of the *prokypsis* platform in the Blachernai Palace. According to pseudo-Kodinos (fourteenth century), this platform was used twice a year, at Christmas and Epiphany, for the highly symbolic *prokypsis* ceremony in which textiles played a major role in staging and revealing the power of the emperor as an image of Christ on earth.⁷⁵ Metochites was certainly familiar with this and other ceremonies of the Byzantine court that prominently featured textiles. In his description of imperial ceremonial, pseudo-Kodinos particularly emphasizes attire: its types, colors, and decorations.⁷⁶ According to the modern editors of pseudo-Kodinos, it is possible that the “tents” of high-ranking members of the court (despots, *sebastokrators*, and caesars, which included the emperor’s sons) were actually baldachins or parasols—in other words, textiles suspended above important figures as signs of honor. The use of such status symbols by members of the imperial family is attested by other sources, including Ibn Battuta’s account of his entry into Constantinople in 1332.⁷⁷ Such fabric structures must have been known to Metochites and would have been similar to the textiles in the Chora imagery that are spread between architectural elements and billow like vaults above the holy figures, almost as honorific canopies (see especially figs. 22–24 and 29). As someone deeply invested in his social advancement and proud of his rank,⁷⁸ Metochites himself was bound to be fond of precious textiles and sumptuous attire as markers of wealth and status, and he is represented richly dressed in the *ktetor* (patron) mosaic of the Chora, kneeling in front of the heavenly king

70 Specific examples will be discussed below. For an overview of the emphasis placed on the Incarnation in the Chora images, see P. A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami* (New York, 1966), 1:27–28. Most scenes from Christ’s infancy cycle, and the scenes that depict John the Baptist Bearing Witness to Christ and the Temptation of Christ, are inscribed with quotations from the Gospels (1:86–114).

71 Ibid., 1:39–41.

72 For the double dedication of the monastery, see *ibid.*, 1:27–28, and R. Ousterhout, “The Virgin of the Chora: An Image and Its Context,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. R. Ousterhout and L. Brubaker (Urbana, IL, 1994), 96–97. Although it is not entirely clear how this double dedication worked, it is possible that the entire monastery was dedicated to the Theotokos and contained the church dedicated to Christ, echoing the idea of Mary as container of Christ (although the parekklesion was probably also dedicated to her).

73 For Metochites, see especially P. Magdalino, “Theodore Metochites, the Chora, and Constantinople,” in *The Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, ed. H. Klein, R. Ousterhout, and B. Pitarakis (Istanbul, 2011), 169–215, with references to previous literature. See also

R. Ousterhout, *The Art of the Kariye Camii* (London, 2002), 119–21. Schroeder, “Prayer and Penance,” 48n2, gives an extensive literature.

74 R. S. Nelson, “Heavenly Allies at the Chora,” *Gesta* 43, no. 1 (2004): 34.

75 See Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos*, 401–11.

76 Ibid., 319–58.

77 Ibid., 41n30. The use of parasols by the Palaiologoi is also argued by N. Asutay-Effenberger, “Überlegungen zu einer Herrscherinsignie in Byzanz: Der Schirm,” in *Der Doppeladler: Byzanz und die Seldschuken in Anatolien vom späten 11. bis zum 13. Jahrhundert*, ed. N. Asutay-Effenberger and F. Daim (Mainz, 2014), 153–60. I thank Ruth Macrides for drawing my attention to these references.

78 See, for example, Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 119–25.



Fig. 4. The Mother of God as “ἡ χώρα τοῦ ἀχωρητου,” “Container [Chora] of the Uncontainable,” ca. 1321; mosaic. The mosaics above narrate the miracles of the Feeding of the Multitude (left) and the Wedding at Cana (right), both with Eucharistic connotations and a visual emphasis on the bread and wine of the Eucharist (the bread contained in the baskets on the left and the blood of the calf sacrificed on the right). Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, ICFA.KC.BIA.2008.

(fig. 2).⁷⁹ As Robert Nelson points out, “Metochites’ appreciation of fine clothes is evident by the attention he devotes to them in one of his poems.”⁸⁰ In addition we know (by his own pen) that Metochites had endowed the Chora with precious gold-embroidered liturgical veils.⁸¹

Metochites’s involvement in the decoration of his church must have contributed to its theological

complexity and symbolic richness.⁸² The sophistication of the iconographic program of the Chora is amply attested and extensively studied by scholars, who have noted the purposeful placement of scenes in relation to the plan and other architectural features of the building, the combination of specific subjects to create meaningful juxtapositions and references to the liturgical function of the spaces, and the use of inscriptions and iconographic details to enhance the message of particular scenes.⁸³ I suggest that in this visual

79 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:42–43.

80 Nelson, “Heavenly Allies at the Chora,” 34.

81 See J. Featherstone, “Metochites’s Poems and the Chora,” in Klein, Ousterhout, and Pitarakis, *Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, 221–22, 226.

82 Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 119–25, esp. 121–25.

83 See, for example, Ousterhout, “The Virgin of the Chora,” 91–109; E. Akyürek, “Funeral Ritual in the Parekklesion of



Fig. 5. Christ as “ἡ χώρα τῶν ζώντων,” “Land (Chora) of the Living,” ca. 1321; mosaic. The mosaics above narrate the miracles of the Wedding at Cana (left) and the Feeding of the Multitude (right), both with Eucharistic connotations and a visual emphasis on the containers of wine and bread respectively. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Fedor Selivanov / Alamy Stock Photo.

context we should pay special attention to depictions of textiles, not only because of their charged significance in Byzantine culture as a whole, but also because the iconographic program of the Chora itself provides additional evidence for the symbolic importance of textiles in the overall design of this sacred space. Natalia Teteriatnikov and Rossitza Schroeder, for instance, have interpreted the image of Christ Chalkites and the

adjacent healing of the *haemorrhoussa* in the esonarthex (inner narthex) as references to the miraculous healing of members of the Komnenian dynasty by the veil of the icon of Christ Chalkites in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (figs. 27 and 28).⁸⁴ Robert Ousterhout has noted the evocative rendering of the Virgin’s veil in the mosaic of the Theotokos above the exonarthex (outer narthex) door facing the walls of Constantinople

the Chora Church,” in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden, 2001), 96–103; S. E. J. Gerstel, “The Chora Parekklesion, the Hope for a Peaceful Afterlife, and Monastic Devotional Practices,” in Klein, Ousterhout, and Pitarakis, *Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, 129–45; and R. S. Nelson, “The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth-Century Constantinople,” *BMGS* 23, no. 1 (1999): 67–101. See also the scholarship mentioned in the following note.

84 Schroeder, “Prayer and Penance,” esp. 44; N. Teteriatnikov, “The Place of the Nun Melania (the Lady of the Mongols) in the Deesis Program of the Inner Narthex of Chora, Constantinople,” *CahArch* 43 (1995): 163–80, esp. 170. The same theme is taken up by D. Knipp, “Narrative and Symbol: The Early Christian Image of the Haemorrhoussa and the Mosaics in the Narthex of the Kariye Camii,” in Baert, *Woman with the Blood Flow*, 143–63, but he seems to be unaware of the significant contribution on the subject by Schroeder.

Fig. 6.
Mary and Christ
surrounded by ancestors,
ca. 1321; mosaic. North
dome, esonarthex, Chora
Monastery (Kariye
Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph by
Evren Kalinbacak /
Alamy Stock Photo.



(fig. 4), seeing it as a reference to Mary's miraculous *maphorion* at the nearby church of Blachernai, a textile relic that was one of the most powerful palladia of the city. Ousterhout has also noted that the scene of the Virgin Receiving the Purple Skein, a prominent symbol of the Incarnation in Byzantine culture (fig. 16), is given high visibility and a special position, aligned with the image of the Theotokos above the exonarthex door.⁸⁵ Robert Nelson has commented on the detailed depiction of the clothing of the Chora saints, who appear dressed in luxurious attire that often reflects contemporary Constantinopolitan fashion and relates the holy figures to their audience in reassuring ways (fig. 3).⁸⁶

85 Ousterhout, "Virgin of the Chora," esp. 94–100.

86 See Nelson, "Heavenly Allies at the Chora," 31–40, esp. 34–35: "By virtue of their courtly dress, the saints in the portico arches are made to resemble their aristocratic beholders, to validate the courtly

In addition, I would like to suggest that the fluted domes of the nave and esonarthex and the ribbed dome of the parekklesion create the impression of textile tents (figs. 6–8). The visual effect is comparable to the dome-like, striped tent of the Tabernacle depicted in the two twelfth-century Kokkinobaphos homiliaries as an Old Testament type of the Theotokos (fig. 9).⁸⁷ To Byzantine viewers, this visual effect of the Chora domes might have evoked the idea of the Christian church as the new Tabernacle, or the Incarnation of the Logos as the veil through which divinity and heaven

ethos of display and conspicuous consumption, and to signal that the saints are allies and friends" (35).

87 Indeed, according to Mullett ("Experiencing the Byzantine Tent," 282), Byzantine tents were domed rather than pitched (ridged). For the Kokkinobaphos Tabernacle tent (Vatican, BAV, Vat. gr. 1162, fol. 133v; Paris, BnF, gr. 1208, fol. 181v), see Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 279–80.

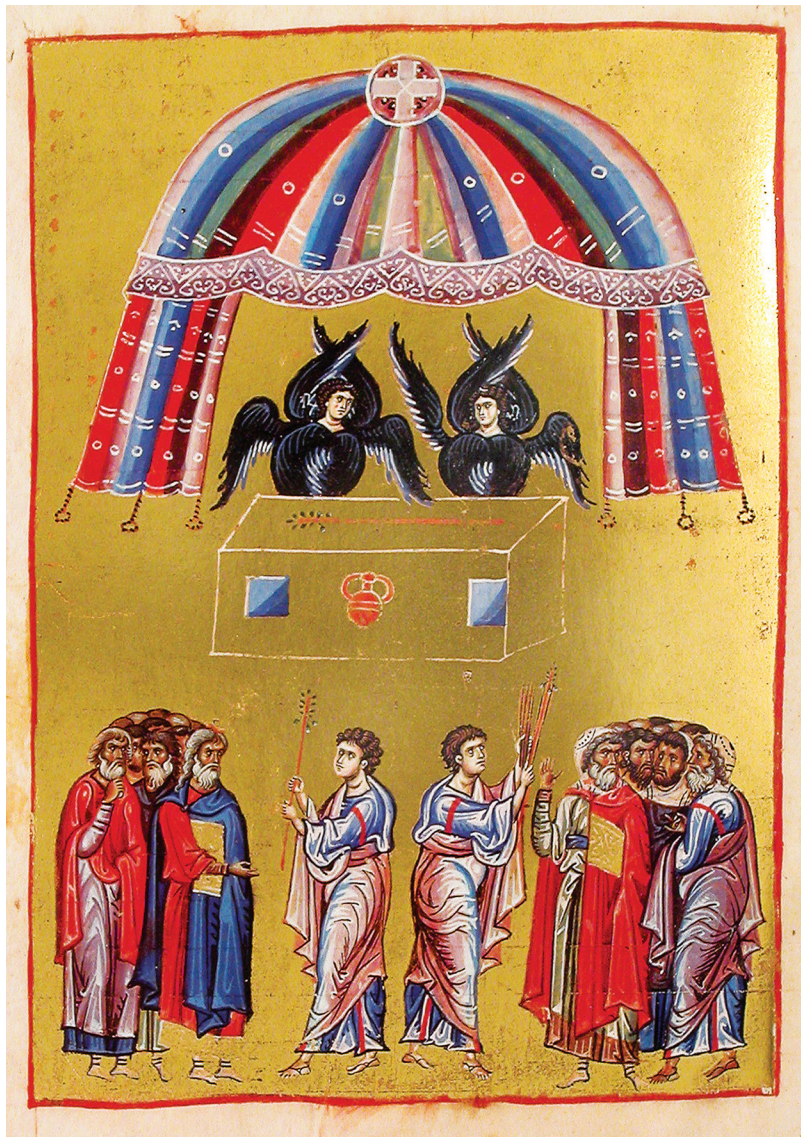


Fig. 7 (Above).
Christ surrounded by
ancestors, ca. 1321; mosaic.
South dome, esonarthex,
Chora Monastery (Kariye
Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph by
Ihsan Gercelman / Alamy
Stock Photo.



Fig. 8.
Mary and Christ surrounded
by archangels, ca. 1321; wall
painting. Parekklesion dome,
Chora Monastery (Kariye
Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public domain;
photograph by Novarc Images
/ Alamy Stock Photo.

Fig. 9.
Tabernacle tent, twelfth
century. Biblioteca
Apostolica Vaticana,
Ms. gr. 1162, fol. 133v.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph
by permission of
the Biblioteca
Apostolica Vaticana.



become visible and accessible. The scene of Isaiah's vision preserved in the Kokkinobaphos homilies illustrates the same idea (fig. 10): the heavenly veil lifted to reveal the pre-eternal Logos is both the body of Mary as "wider than heaven" (since she contained in her womb the Sun of Justice and creator of heaven), and the body of Christ as the veil of the heavenly Holy of Holies through which humanity gains access to God's kingdom behind the visible firmament.⁸⁸ This

idea of divine revelation through the textile-like mediation of the Incarnation is particularly appropriate for

as a veil and considered to be the prototype of the veil in front of the Holy of Holies. See *ibid.*, 270n22, 280n86, with references to further literature. In his *Explanation of the Divine Temple*, Symeon of Thessalonike draws the same parallel between the veils of the Byzantine *templon* and the heavenly "tent": "καὶ διὰ μὲν τοῦ ἐν τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ καταπετάσματος τὴν ἐπουράνιον ἐκτυποῖ περὶ τὸν Θεὸν σκηνήν, ἐνθα τῶν ἀγγέλων οἱ δῆμοι καὶ ἡ τῶν ἁγίων ἐστὶν ἀνάπαυσις" ("By means of the curtain in the sanctuary it typifies the heavenly tabernacle round about God, where the hosts of angels and the repose of the saints are"): *Explanation of the Divine Temple* 17, in Hawkes-Teeple, *Liturgical Commentaries*, 90–91.

88 Vatican, BAV, Vat. gr. 1162, fol. 119v; Paris, BnF, gr. 1208, fol. 162r. See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 280–82. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the visible firmament of heaven was imagined



Fig. 10. Isaiah's vision and the lifted veil of heaven, twelfth century. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ms. gr. 1162, fol. 119v. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by permission of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

the Chora domes, considering their iconography: in the esonarthex, a medallion with the Theotokos and her offspring and another with Christ Pantokrator are surrounded by the human ancestors of Jesus, placing emphasis on the Incarnation of God through a human lineage. In the parekklesion, Mary and Christ are surrounded by the heavenly court, emphasizing the Incarnation of God through the image of the human mother and her divine child surrounded by archangels.⁸⁹ In addition, many of the patterns in the

marble revetment of the Chora nave and narthex walls seem chosen to create the impression of striped and

89 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:49–51, 213–15. The fluted dome of the nave does not retain its original decoration, but it probably included the Pantokrator—a subject that would make associations with the heavenly tent very appropriate. The *prothesis* has a fluted

dome decorated with wall paintings of angels and the *diakonikon* has a ribbed dome with wall paintings of apostles and a medallion of Christ in the middle. These figures could be said to co-celebrate the liturgy with the church priests and deacons below, presiding from a heavenly realm visualized once more as a tent. Indeed, Underwood has observed that two of the surviving angels are dressed in liturgical vestments and therefore all of them must be celebrating the Divine Liturgy (1:262–63, 65). Another visual effect created by the fluted or ribbed domes with a central medallion (especially the esonarthex domes decorated with gold mosaics that reflect light along the ridges of the dome structure) is that of a radiating sun, which is particularly appropriate since the central medallion includes Christ, the Sun of Justice, either alone or in his mother's arms. This visual allusion is compatible with the idea of the Chora domes as heavenly tents.

Fig. 11.
South view of nave,
with marble
revetment resembling
striped and draped
textiles, ca. 1321.
Chora Monastery
(Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph
by B. O’Kane /
Alamy Stock Photo.



Fig. 12.
South view of
esonarthex, with
marble revetment
resembling striped and
draped textiles and
vaulting resembling
canopies, ca. 1321.
Chora Monastery
(Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph
by Evren Kalinbacak /
Alamy Stock Photo.



draped textiles (figs. 11–12), reminiscent of the painted veils in Lidov's analysis, possibly with similar references in mind (Tabernacle, Temple veil, Incarnation, and mediation).⁹⁰ Even the complex vaulting system of the entire church and parekklesion seems like a series of textile canopies richly embroidered in mosaic or painting (fig. 12). Thus, the entire space looks like a magnificently luxurious tent: a Christian Tabernacle on earth, foreshadowing the heavenly Holy of Holies that will receive the just at the end of time.⁹¹

Symbolic Veils of Mediation: Background Textiles in the Architectural Settings of the Chora Visual Narratives

Prominent red textiles are depicted in several of the Chora mosaics and wall paintings, either draped over individual buildings or spread between structures. For convenience, I will occasionally refer to these as “background textiles.” Similar depictions appear in numerous Byzantine images, especially in the late period.⁹²

90 For some representative views, see Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 13–14 (sanctuary apse), 36 (esonarthex). This visual effect is not common among Byzantine marble revetments, which usually present a wider variety of shapes with a butterfly effect. While Ousterhout writes that “the marble revetments betray a restless mannerism” (124), I suggest that if we consider them as intentional allusions to textiles, their “mannerism” makes sense as a symbolically meaningful iconographic choice.

91 Compare Lidov's comment about the mosaic vaults of Hagia Sophia resembling ornamental veils: “The Temple Veil,” 107 and fig. 12. Also compare what Symeon of Thessalonike says about the sanctuary typifying the heavenly Tabernacle as the repose of the saints (n88 above).

92 Consider, for example, the prominent presence of such “background textiles” in several images illustrating the twenty-four *oikoi* or stanzas of the Akathistos hymn dedicated to Mary. I. Spatharakis, *The Pictorial Cycles of the Akathistos Hymn for the Virgin* (Leiden, 2005), includes a complete photographic documentation of all the surviving cycles from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I list here only cycles with three or more images including “background textiles” (not counting curtains or the veil held by figures behind the Virgin in images of the Conception illustrating *oikos* 3): Spatharakis, *Akathistos*, figs. 2, 4, 6, 14, 22, 24 (church of Panagia, Roustika, Rethymnon, Crete); 37–40, 42, 60 (Valsamonerou Monastery, Crete); 112, 116, 122–24, 127, 129–30, 132, 134 (monastery of St. Demetrios, Markova Sušica, outside Skopje); 193, 196, 214 (Tomic Psalter); 217, 220–21, 224 (Serbian Psalter). Many more examples of background textiles exist from the late Byzantine period, mostly in church wall paintings. This is noted (without further comment) by D. Mouriki, *Οι τοιχογραφίες του Σωτήρα κοντά στο*

They should be interpreted on a case-by-case basis, considering the content and immediate visual context of each image. Although for the purpose of this essay I limit myself to the Chora material, the concept of mediation could be a useful key in unlocking layers of meaning in all representations of background textiles. Assuming a simply decorative function for them ignores the symbolic richness of Byzantine iconography and of textiles in particular. Assuming a simply practical function—the actual use of textiles as architectural furnishings, especially in wealthy households—cannot account for the particular modes of display of many of these fabrics or for their narrative contexts. They are often used in ways that render them superfluous from a practical point of view (for example, lying on rooftops, figs. 28, 30), or they are out of place as signs of luxury, since they appear not only in wealthy settings but also in Joseph's humble home (fig. 24) and in urban spaces in which Christ encounters destitute, ailing, and marginalized people (fig. 29). Since all the Chora scenes refer in one way or another to Mary as instrument of the Incarnation and to Christ as the Savior, a red textile could be an appropriate symbol of their role in human salvation. Such a symbolic use of fabrics in the Chora images is entirely consonant with the prominent and widespread textual, visual, and ritual references to the Incarnation and human salvation in terms of textiles and clothing in Byzantine culture, as discussed above. Notions of mystery, revelation, sacredness, and honor could also be evoked through the prominent textile motifs that surround the figures involved in the sacred stories of Mary's and Christ's life. Likewise, an emphasis on salvation as the result of the Incarnation might be implied through the motif of textiles spread above human figures in a manner that suggests shelter and protection.⁹³

Αλεποχώρι Μεγαρίδος (Athens, 1978), 53. I thank Maria Parani for drawing my attention to and providing this reference.

93 Compare the iconography of the Pokrov (Σκέπη, the Intercession of the Theotokos), in which the veil is often spread above the figures like a canopy, giving visual form to the idea of the Virgin as protectress. Although no Byzantine representations of this image are known, it has been argued that the feast (most popular in the Slavic world) has its origins in early tenth-century Constantinople. See B. Lourié, “The Feast of Pokrov, Its Byzantine Origin, and the Cult of Gregory the Illuminator and Isaac the Parthian (Sahak Part'ev) in Byzantium,” *Scrinium* 7 (2001): 231–81. For the Theotokos as protectress, covering the faithful with her mantle, in relation to the Pokrov tradition, see also Ledit, *Marie*, 291–97. On the symbolism of the veil

Fig. 13.
El Greco, *The Annunciation*,
ca. 1576; oil on
canvas; 117 × 98 cm.
Museo Nacional
Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, inv. 172
(1975.35). Artwork
in the public domain;
photograph by
Museo Nacional
Thyssen-Bornemisza
/ Scala / Art
Resource, NY.



Before I explore the meaning of textiles in specific Chora images, I would like to look forward to the after-life of the Byzantine motif of painted veils in order to examine a unique development that can retrospectively speak of the vitality of incarnational textile symbols in the Byzantine context. I refer to Annunciation images that belong to the Italian production of Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco), who was initially trained as an icon painter and who, in his Cretan works,

demonstrates a deep understanding of Byzantine theology.⁹⁴ He is the only European painter I know of to ever employ the ingenious motif of divine light materially transformed into a red veil behind Mary. The Annunciation in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza dated around 1576 is perhaps the best example (fig. 13).⁹⁵ The

in the Pokrov iconography, see Papastavrou, *Annonciation*, 346–50, fig. 82.

94 See M. Evangelatou, “Between East and West: The Symbolism of Space in the Art of Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco),” in Brownlee and Gondicas, *Renaissance Encounters*, 147–87, esp. 147–69, with references to further literature.

95 See D. Davies, ed., *El Greco* (London, 2003), 112–13, no. 16; dated to the mid-1570s.



Fig. 14.
El Greco, *The Annunciation*,
early 1570s; oil on panel;
26.7 × 20 cm. Museo
Nacional del Prado,
Madrid, inv. P000827.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph by
Museo Nacional del Prado /
Art Resource, NY.

transformation of divine light into the red veil occurs at a nodal point of the painting, between Mary's head and the descending Holy Spirit. The viewer's attention is drawn to that part of the painting both by the direction of the Virgin's gaze and by Gabriel's gesture, which announces exactly what that materialization of light into fabric visualizes: the Incarnation of God. A large fold of the red veil swoops upward and to the right, in the direction of the Spirit's descent, indicating that El Greco was intent on giving visual form to this highly meaningful light-into-veil transformation. The way the red veil envelops the Virgin and also streams upward above her suggests that this fabric is an extension of her

body, exactly like the body of the Logos incarnate: a veil of human flesh produced by the Theotokos in order to become the material medium for the revelation of God. The much smaller Annunciation now in the Museo del Prado, probably painted a few years prior to that at the Thyssen-Bornemisza, seems to mark an earlier step in El Greco's exploration of this iconography, already with clear intent (fig. 14).⁹⁶ Here, the golden rays or

96 Ibid., 104–5, no. 12; dated to the early 1570s. Another Annunciation with very similar iconography to the Prado panel, probably dating between the two images described here, is now kept in a private collection in Madrid; see J. Álvarez Lopera, ed., *El Greco*:

Fig. 15.
Annunciation from
the double-sided icon
of the Virgin
Psychosostria in
Ohrid, fourteenth
century; tempera and
gold on panel; 93 ×
68 cm. Icon Gallery,
Ohrid. Artwork in
the public domain;
photograph by Erich
Lessing / Art
Resource, NY.



luminous clouds of divine light that descend from the Holy Spirit toward Mary are arranged along the same diagonal axis as the folds of the red veil, which seems to take shape out of this nebulous light. A

Identity and Transformation; Crete, Italy, Spain (Milan, 1999), 370, no. 19.

similar interaction between divine light and red veil, but according to the Byzantine idiom (symbolic rather than illusionistic), can be seen in those images of the Annunciation in which the rays that visualize the descent of the Holy Spirit radiate in front of (and in a sense through) a veil spread above the Theotokos. A famous example is the fourteenth-century

Annunciation image from the double-sided icon with the Virgin Psychosostria from Peribleptos in Ohrid (fig. 15).⁹⁷ It is possible that El Greco had seen similar examples in his native Crete.⁹⁸ In any case, it is most probable that his original and erudite iconography was inspired by his familiarity with images and texts of the Byzantine tradition, and his unique access to them could explain why he alone among the painters of western Europe employed this theologically eloquent and visually powerful motif. Looking back to Byzantium through his work, we can further appreciate the degree to which that culture had elevated textiles to dynamic and multilayered symbols of mediation, and especially of the ultimate mediation between earth and heaven, accomplished in the Incarnation of the Logos through the Theotokos. It is in the framework of such

theological ideas and symbols that I will examine the textiles depicted in the Chora.

The red color of the textiles in the Chora images is similar to that employed for the purple wool the Virgin is assigned to spin for the Temple veil (fig. 16).⁹⁹ Either purple or red (both precious and prestigious colors with prominent royal connotations in the late Byzantine period),¹⁰⁰ such veils could allude to divinity and humanity interwoven in Christ: *heavenly* royalty emanating from God the Father and *earthly* royalty originating from David the human ancestor of the Messiah. If we turn to individual scenes, we can venture more elaborate interpretations by taking into account the subject matter and iconographic details of each episode and its position in the overall program. The following discussion is not exhaustive but focuses on characteristic cases of background textiles that may

97 See H. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New York, 2004), 178–99, no. 99. For more examples, see the next note. The motif survives in the post-Byzantine period and is also attested in Russian images, for example, two seventeenth-century works: an icon in the State Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg, and a veil in the Solvychevodsk Museum of Art and History. In the latter case, the rays of light do not descend through but are parallel to a veil that cascades on the buildings behind Gabriel and toward the Virgin; yet heaven itself, through which the rays shine, also looks like a red veil (being the color of the actual fabric on which the image is embroidered). The Incarnation symbolism of this textile image is further enhanced by the fact that the red body of Christ Emmanuel is embroidered on the chest of the Virgin, surrounded by the red (i.e., purple) thread she is spinning for the Temple veil. The chromatic resonance between the red veil of heaven, the body of Christ, and the thread in the Virgin's hands—all of which are linked by the diagonal descent of the rays of light—evocatively visualizes the Incarnation as the investiture of the divine Logos in human flesh. For images of these two Russian examples, see *Treasures of Sacred Art of the State Museum of the History of Religion of Saint-Petersburg* (London, 1993), 2–3; *Ikônes et ikônes brodées de la Sainte Russie, XVI^{ème} et XVII^{ème} siècles* (Thonon-les-Bains, 1991), 33–34 and front cover.

98 For example, the fifteenth-century wall paintings of the Annunciation and the Conception (*oikoi* 1 and 4 of the Akathistos cycle) in the Valsamonerou Monastery, outside the village of Vorizia. See Spatharakis, *Akathistos*, 24, 27, figs. 37, 40. A similar motif, in which the rays of light are directed toward but do not descend before the red textile spread between the Virgin and heaven, appears in the Annunciation illustrating *oikos* 3 of the Akathistos in two manuscripts, the second of which might have been produced in Crete: Moscow, State Historical Museum, Synodal gr. 429 (produced around 1360 in Constantinople, possibly at the Hodegon Monastery for Patriarch Theophilos Kokkinos), and Madrid, Escorial, R.I. 19 (produced around 1400 on the model of the previous manuscript). See Spatharakis, *Akathistos*, 74–76, figs. 150, 172.

99 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:76–77, 2:94. See Evangelatou, “Threads of Power,” 268–69, for the use of red as a reference to purple in Byzantine images of the Annunciation. Among the Chora mosaics and wall paintings, there is only one exception to the red background textiles that I am aware of: the fabric spread above the building on the left in the scene of the Annunciation at the Well. According to Underwood, it is green, but in all the photographs I have seen (published in books about the Chora or posted online) it looks very similar to the blue color of Mary's *maphorion* and the darker blue hues of the angel's mantle. Given that Byzantines focused more on the bright or dark qualities of colors than on specific chromatic definitions, for which their vocabulary was rather unstable (see Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos*, 353), it is possible that the artist's intention was to suggest a link and parallel with the blue and therefore heavenly color of Mary's and Gabriel's garments. If we consider all red textiles in scenes before and after the Annunciation at the Well as symbols of the Incarnation that is either yet to come or has been already accomplished (as discussed below in more detail), then this uniquely bluish-green textile could have been chosen to highlight the very first moment of contact between the heavenly messenger and the woman who would soon become “wider than heaven.” Already in the fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria had interpreted the colors of the Old Testament Tabernacle and its various liturgical fabrics as symbolic of the Incarnation, connecting blue to the heavenly and divine origin of Christ, purple to his royalty as king of heaven, and red to his sacrifice as the Logos incarnate. See *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, PG 68:853. It should also be noted that although some of the Chora background textiles are monochrome red, others have a wide gold or dark blue/purple band (the same color as Mary's *maphorion*), and those chromatic choices may also be significant and symbolic of the Incarnation. Both gold and purple can refer to either divine or human royalty (the divine Logos as king of heaven, or Christ as the descendant of King David).

100 Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos*, 354.



Fig. 16. The Theotokos Receives the Purple Skein, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0473.

be interpreted as symbolic references to the Incarnation and to human salvation through Mary and Christ.

The Life of Mary

An appropriate starting point is an image that appears at a nodal point in the sacred space of the Chora: Mary Fed by an Angel in the Holy of Holies. This episode first appears in the central bay of the esonarthex in front of the nave door, in the upper part of Mary's Entry into the Temple (fig. 17); it is then unusually repeated as an independent scene on the arch to the right of the nave door, next to the *ktetor* mosaic (fig. 18 and right part of fig. 17).¹⁰¹ Both images belong to a group of scenes along the central axis of the building, connecting all the main gates and leading from the outer door to the

sanctuary apse. According to Ousterhout, the images depicted along this axis bear strong Eucharistic connotations in both thematic and iconographic terms.¹⁰² The episode of Mary fed with heavenly bread prefigures the Annunciation, when the Virgin receives the creator of heaven in her womb;¹⁰³ it also alludes to

102 Ousterhout, "Virgin of the Chora," esp. 93–101. These images include Mary as "Container of the Uncontainable" and Christ as "Land of the Living" in the mosaics above the main doors of the esonarthex, and the Miracles of the Wedding at Cana and the Feeding of the Multitudes in the central bay between the two doors (figs. 4–5).

103 Note Underwood's observation that in this mosaic the Virgin is unusually inscribed as Mother of God (Μήτηρ Θεοῦ, in the usual abbreviated form ΜΡ ΘΥ), a title that reappears only in the last two scenes of the same Marian cycle in the esonarthex, after the Annunciation, i.e., in scenes in which Mary is pregnant. See Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:74, 83–84.

101 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:72–74.



Fig. 17. The Virgin's Entry into the Temple; the Virgin Fed by an Angel in the Holy of Holies (center of the Entry episode, and independent scene on the right), ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Evren Kalinbacak / Alamy Stock Photo.

the Eucharist, when all believers become recipients of the bread of heaven, the body of Christ.¹⁰⁴ All three

104 For the incarnational and Eucharistic connotations of Mary's miraculous feeding by the angel, see, e.g., homilies on Mary's Entry into the Temple by the following authors: Germanos, PG 98:316C (Mary receives ambrosia and nectar [in Byzantine literature, the Eucharist is described in these terms as well]); George of Nikomedeia, *oratio* 7, PG 100:1448AB (the nourishment Mary receives by the angel prefigures the bread of life, which refers to both the Incarnation and the Eucharist); Peter of Argos, published in E. Toniolo, "Alcune omelie mariane dei sec. X–XIV: Pietro d'Argo, Niceta Paflagone, Michele Psellos e Ninfo Ieromonaco," *Marianum* 33 (1971): 366, ll. 343–46 (the angelic nourishment prefigures the Incarnation); and Theophylact of Ohrid, PG 126:141C (Mary receives the Eucharist by the angel-priest). See also H. Maguire, "Abaton and Oikonomia: St. Neophytos and the Iconography of the Presentation of the Virgin," in *Medieval Cyprus: Studies in Art, Architecture, and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki*, ed. N. P. Ševčenko and C. Moss (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 102. It is also significant that while the Protoevangelium of James does not specify what kind of food the angel brought to the Virgin, usually in Byzantine

events—Mary's miraculous feeding, the Annunciation, and the Eucharist—are moments of mediation between earth and heaven, humanity and divinity, and they prefigure, initiate, or reenact the Incarnation.

In the independent scene of Mary's feeding (fig. 18), a red textile appears in a prominent position, linking a tower-like structure with one of the columns of the ciborium above the Virgin. The billowing red veil appears like a second pair of wings parallel to the angelic wings, the medium through which the heavenly bread is brought to earth to be delivered to the living altar of God.¹⁰⁵ In the Chora mosaics, when the Holy

iconography he appears handing her a circular loaf of bread similar to a Eucharistic loaf (as in the Chora mosaics). This is also mentioned by M. J. Milliner, "The Virgin of the Passion: Development, Dissemination, and Afterlife of a Byzantine Icon Type" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 119.

105 For recurring references to Mary as living altar, sanctuary, and temple of God in Byzantine literature, see, e.g., Eustratiades,

Fig. 18.
The Virgin Fed by an Angel in
the Holy of Holies, ca. 1321;
mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora
Monastery (Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in
the public domain;
photograph provided by
Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees
for Harvard University,
Washington, DC, The
Byzantine Institute and
Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork
Records and Papers, ca.
1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0472.



of Holies appears in scenes relevant to Mary's life, it looks like a Christian sanctuary with a ciborium above an altar.¹⁰⁶ However, in this particular scene the altar is

Θεοτόκος, 2 (ἁγίασμα, ἁγιαστήριον), 30 (ιερόν, ἱλαστήριον), 47–48 (ναός), 51 (οἶκος), 71–72 (σκηνή, σκήνος, σκήνωμα), 79 (τράπεζα, τόπος ἁγιάσματος).

106 It should be emphasized that this “Christianization” of the Holy of Holies (with the door, altar, and ciborium that in Byzantine visual production identify Christian sanctuaries) is attested in the Chora only in scenes from the pictorial cycle depicting the life of Mary, the living temple and altar of God. This iconographic choice

emphasizes the idea that Mary is the container of Christ's body sacrificed on the cross and on the Eucharistic table. In the Old Testament scenes of the Chora parekklesion depicting the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple as a prefiguration of Mary, there is neither ciborium nor door to relate that holy space with a Christian sanctuary, since it is Mary's later historical role in the Incarnation that leads to the replacement of the Jewish sanctuary by the Christian ones. However, the Old Testament representations are also marked by prominent red veils draped over the architectural structures, probably to emphasize the idea of mediation between divinity and humanity, visualized first in the veil of the Holy of Holies and later in the veil of Christ's body. These images are briefly discussed below (see

replaced by Mary herself.¹⁰⁷ As the living altar of God, she receives heavenly bread, which prefigures both the Incarnation of Christ as the bread of heaven leavened in her womb and the heavenly bread of the Eucharist offered on the church altar. The red veil, which echoes the angelic wings along a diagonal axis from high to low and reaches the ciborium above the living altar, could indeed emphasize divinity's descent from on high to be invested in the veil of flesh woven in Mary's womb, so that God and his people could be reunited through the Incarnation and the Eucharist.

The possible Eucharistic connotations of this red veil could be reinforced in the eyes of the viewers if they were to observe that the altar is covered by a red textile in the adjacent scene of Mary's Entry into the Temple (fig. 17). Looking at the independent scene of the miraculous feeding of Mary, it is hard to imagine that the red veil was not conceived and perceived as a polyvalent symbol, meant to highlight the deeper meanings of the scene in terms of incarnational and Eucharistic mediation. Byzantine viewers arriving in the esonarthex from the main entrance would be culturally predisposed to identify the symbolic meaning of this textile due to its visual context and special iconographic treatment. If they were to wander off to the left, they would encounter several other scenes from Mary's life that include prominent textile elements and together create a fertile context for their symbolic interpretation. Below I discuss a few examples in narrative chronological order starting from the first bay at the north end of the esonarthex (which was not the first one viewers would have seen when entering the esonarthex from the central door).

In the scene of Anna's Prayer and Annunciation in her garden, a prominent red textile is draped over a freestanding column above the future mother of the Theotokos, who is dressed in a red *maphorion*

(fig. 19).¹⁰⁸ Prayer is a dynamic moment of mediation between humanity and divinity, and this particular prayer will result in the birth of the mother who will bridge earth and heaven through her son (note also the conspicuous staircase to the left, a possible allusion to Jacob's Ladder as a prefiguration of Mary bridging earth and heaven, depicted as such in the wall paintings of the Chora parekklesion). The column appears as a symbol of the Logos incarnate in Byzantine textual and visual sources,¹⁰⁹ so the draping of this textile on top of a column could further reinforce the reference to the Incarnation as the miracle that will be realized through Anna's offspring. The tent-like fluted dome above this bay visualizes the investiture of the Logos in human flesh by depicting Mary and her offspring surrounded by their male ancestors, from David onward (fig. 6). In the scene of Anna's prayer, a shell-like semi-dome to the left of the red veil visually echoes the fluted architectural dome above, as if to draw a connection between Anna's Annunciation and the Davidic lineage of Christ through his mother (compare figs. 6 and 19). In both cases, the symbolic textiles of the red veil and the tent-like dome refer to human salvation through the Incarnation, that is, the fabrication of the body of Christ as son of Mary and grandson of Anna.

Mary's Nativity is dominated by a sumptuous red textile emerging from behind a wall and linking the two structures that flank the scene, visually articulating mediation in terms of connection and union (fig. 20).¹¹⁰ Of a similar color as the *maphorion* covering Anna's body and the fabric in Mary's crib, this textile could symbolize the birth of the virginal body of Mary destined to provide the veil of Christ's salvific body. Mary's bath in a chalice-like basin prefigures her son's bath in the scene of his Nativity, in which God is humbled through the Incarnation that will lead to his future sacrifice on the cross, when the

also Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:235–37, 231–32; 3:236, 234). Mary as bearer of the Eucharist was a widespread concept in the textual, visual, and ritual record of Byzantium; see M. Evangelatou, "Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The Theotokos as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture," in *The Reception of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, ed. T. Arentzen and M. B. Cunningham (Cambridge, 2019), 77–119. For some preliminary observations, see Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 271, 285.

107 Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 39.

108 Eastern lunette of the first (northern) bay: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:64–65.

109 See H. Papastavrou, "Le symbolisme de la colonne dans la scène de l'Annonciation," *ΔΧΑΕ* 15 (1989–90): 145–60, esp. 146–51, 155–57; M. Evangelatou, "Ο κίονας ως σύμβολο του Χριστού σε έργα Βυζαντινής τέχνης," *Αρχαιολογία και Τέχνες* 88 (2003): 52–58; Papastavrou, *Annonciation*, 261–86.

110 Eastern lunette of the second bay: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:66–67.



Fig. 19. Anna's Prayer and Annunciation in Her Garden, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0383.

Temple veil will be rent asunder.¹¹¹ In this visual context, the red fabric in the background highlights the very process and outcome of the Incarnation by activating a number of symbolic references that span the Old and New Testaments. This symbolic veil seems to visualize the words of the Akathistos hymn in honor of Mary: “Hail, through whom Hades was stripped bare / Hail, through whom we were clothed in glory”,¹¹² “Hail, robe of free intercession given to the naked”,¹¹³

111 Indeed, it has been suggested that this scene contains Eucharistic allusions through the chalice-like bathing basin and the altar-like table. See P. Weiss, *Die Mosaiken des Chora-Klosters in Istanbul: Theologie in Bildern aus spätbyzantinischer Zeit* (Stuttgart, 1997), 58–59.

112 *Oikos* 7.16–17, Greek text and English translation in L. M. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn* (Leiden, 2001), 8–9.

113 *Oikos* 13.16, Peltomaa, *Akathistos*, 12–13.

“Hail, Tabernacle of God and the Word / Hail, greater than the Holy of Holies.”¹¹⁴ Interestingly, the structure behind Anna is topped by a ciborium and includes a red veil spread across a window opening, both of which could be meant to evoke the Holy of Holies and its veil, albeit in a form more attuned to a domestic setting.

When Zachariah prays to God for the proper selection of Mary's betrothed, she stands behind a red-clad altar that holds the twelve rods of the suitors (fig. 21).¹¹⁵ A red billowing veil similar to the one in the scene of Mary's miraculous feeding diagonally links one of the ciborium columns with a tall architectural structure that might be meant to indicate a gateway (with a tower pierced by windows and two monumental

114 *Oikos* 23.6–7, Peltomaa, *Akathistos*, 18–19.

115 Western soffit of the arch between the second and third bay of the esonarthex: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:78–79.



Fig. 20. The Nativity of the Virgin, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0433.

flanking walls ending in piers in front of the sanctuary). As a moment of prayer focusing on a development in Mary's life that will take her out of the Temple to safeguard her purity as the living temple of God under the protection of Joseph, this is another instance of powerful mediation referring to the Incarnation. In addition, the altar, ciborium, and double sanctuary door in front of which Zachariah prays imbue the scene with Eucharistic references. Therefore, the red textile could symbolize mediation in terms of prayer, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist—all three being gateways to salvation, connecting divinity from on high to humanity down below. Such a reading is reinforced by the chromatic resonance that aligns the billowing red textile with the red veil of the altar and the red robe of the praying Zachariah.

In the adjacent scene, a similar fabric diagonally links one column of the altar ciborium to the gate

through which Joseph enters to receive Mary (fig. 22).¹¹⁶ Here Zachariah, Mary, and Joseph stand below the veil that appears like an honorific canopy, emphasizing the importance of the betrothal that brings closer the fulfillment of the Virgin's role as bride of God. Once more, the red color of the billowing veil resonates with the red altar cover and Zachariah's priestly garments, highlighting the sacramental nature of the encounter centered on the living altar of God, the Theotokos. To the right of this scene, Mary, Joseph, and one of his sons walk toward his home, where she will become the living temple of God through the Annunciation. The three figures appear in front of a gated structure topped by three towers, all linked by a prominent red veil (fig. 23).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Western lunette of the second bay: *ibid.*, 1:79–80.

¹¹⁷ Western soffit of the arch between the second and first bay: *ibid.*, 1:81.

Fig. 21.
Zachariah Praying before
the Rods of the Suitors, ca.
1321; mosaic. Esonarthex,
Chora Monastery (Kariye
Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public
domain; photograph
provided by Dumbarton
Oaks, Trustees for Harvard
University, Washington,
DC, The Byzantine Institute
and Dumbarton Oaks
Fieldwork Records and
Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s,
BF.S.1991.0445.



As Mary is entrusted to a virtuous man from the tribe of David, she walks a step closer to her destiny as the one who will provide the veil of Christ's human flesh, thereby ensuring the salvation of the world as willed by the Trinity, a concept possibly evoked by the three towers connected by the textile.

The red textiles of these betrothal scenes can also refer to Mary's role in the Incarnation by evoking the

use of fabrics in two rituals of great importance in Byzantine culture, namely the imperial *adventus* and the marriage ceremony. As the city of God,¹¹⁸ the Virgin is prepared for the advent of the King, so the architectural structures behind her are adorned with

118 Eustratiades, *Θεοτόκος*, 63–64 (πόλις), 70 (Σιών); Ledit, *Marie*, 82 (in connection to Psalms 45:5, 47:2, 86:3).



Fig. 22. The Virgin Entrusted to Joseph, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0444.

precious textiles much as an urban setting was prepared for an imperial *adventus*. During this ceremony, the city could be perceived as an adorned bride, receiving the emperor as her bridegroom. Likewise, Mary was understood to be the bride of God.¹¹⁹ Red is the color most commonly associated with Byzantine bridal attire, which occasionally included a veil.¹²⁰ Therefore, the red textiles veiling the city of God create a strong allusion to the Virgin as his bride.¹²¹ All

these references are particularly appropriate for any scene in which Mary is accompanied by Joseph: the rich symbolism of background textiles reminds the viewers that she is not Joseph's but God's bride and dwelling. Such a reading complements Underwood's suggestion that the architecture in the background of the scene of Joseph leading the Virgin to his house depicts Mary as the Temple. Underwood observes that the figure depicted in the lunette above the entrance of the gate-like building (fig. 23) should be related to Mary's depiction in the lunette above the gate of Jerusalem guarded by an angel in the parekklesion wall paintings (fig. 34, right), evoking the well-known identification of Mary

119 See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 275n52.

120 Parani, "Byzantine Bridal Costume," 202–3, 210 observes that red is the most common color associated with brides in Byzantium, although other colors are occasionally used. On the bridal veil, see *ibid.*, 202.

121 Parani mentions an interesting passage in the *Oneirocriticon* of Achmet (*Achmetis Oneirocriticon*, ed. F. Drexel [Leipzig, 1925], 116), which could be relevant to the red color of bridal attire, "namely that the red colour of garments signified intense joy, especially in

the case of women" (Parani, "Byzantine Bridal Costume," 202). This complements well the possible bridal associations of the background textiles in the Chora: the city of God, Mary, is veiled in red as a bride rejoicing in anticipation of her role as Theotokos and bride of God.

Fig. 23.
Joseph Taking the Virgin
to His House, ca. 1321;
mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora
Monastery (Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork
in the public domain;
photograph provided by
Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees
for Harvard University,
Washington, DC, The
Byzantine Institute and
Dumbarton Oaks
Fieldwork Records and
Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s,
BF.S.1991.0478.



with God's gate.¹²² Interestingly, in the esonarthex mosaic, Joseph stands in front of the gate with its veil drawn to one side, but he is walking not through but rather past it. Only God can enter and exit through this gate, Mary's virginal body, in order to reveal himself to humankind.¹²³

122 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:81, 235. See also Ledit, *Marie*, 90–92 (in connection to Ezekiel 44:1–3); Eustratiades, *Θεοτόκος*, 29 (θύρα).

123 An analogous emphasis on Mary as the bride of God, especially in contexts that refer to her betrothal to Joseph, appears in

The interpretation of the red textiles in relation to the idea of Mary as the pure bride and city of God is also appropriate for the paired scenes of Joseph Taking His Leave and Joseph Reproaching the Virgin, both of which are centered on Mary's pregnancy (fig. 24).¹²⁴

the two twelfth-century Kokkinobaphos homiliaries: Christ on Solomon's couch (i.e., the bridegroom on a bed that prefigures Mary as the bride and Theotokos) introduces the fourth homily, on Mary's betrothal. See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 274–75, fig. 15.

124 Western lunette of first (northern) bay: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:83–84.



Fig. 24. Joseph Taking His Leave of the Virgin (left) and Joseph Reproaching the Virgin (right), ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0384.

A red billowing textile in an almost architectonic, vault-like formation appears above the protagonists in each scene. The inscription of the first scene, immediately above the more prominent of the two textiles, emphasizes the concept of dwelling: Joseph proclaims, “Behold, I am leaving thee in my house [οἶκῳ] while I go away to build [οἰκοδομεῖν].”¹²⁵ Although Joseph talks about his house and the other houses he is about to construct, the inscription in combination with the vault-like textile above a modest and distressed Virgin could also evoke the idea of *her* as the house that God has built for himself.¹²⁶ The veil above Mary,

voluminous like a pregnant body, filled with the spirit of the wind, is marked by a band of dark blue or purple color identical to that which envelops Mary standing below, about to be impregnated by the Holy Spirit.¹²⁷

If the above interpretations are valid, what about the red textiles adorning the palace of the governor in the Enrollment for Taxation (fig. 25) and the palace of Herod in the Massacre of the Innocents (fig. 26),

125 Ibid., 1:83.

126 The wording of the inscription also recalls Proverbs 9:1—“Ἡ σοφία ᾠκοδόμησεν ἑαυτῇ οἶκον”—which in Byzantine exegesis was taken as a reference to the Incarnation of the Logos, God’s

Wisdom, through Mary as the house of God. See K. Ware, “‘The Final Mystery’: The Dormition of the Holy Virgin in Orthodox Worship,” in *Mary for Time and Eternity: Papers on Mary and Ecumenism Given at International Congresses of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Chester (2002) and Bath (2004), a Conference at Woldingham (2003) and Other Meetings in 2005*, ed. W. M. McLaughlin and J. Pinnock (Leominster, 2007), 229.

127 See Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:83–84 for arguments suggesting that Mary is depicted as already pregnant in this scene.



Fig. 25. The Enrollment for Taxation, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Evren Kalinbacak / Alamy Stock Photo.

among the scenes of the exonarthex?¹²⁸ In such contexts, are these precious fabrics just a reference to the wealthy, prestigious setting? Connotations of luxury would have been consonant with Metochites's own interests.¹²⁹ Textile markers of luxury and prestige are also appropriate for the house of Joachim and Anna or the Temple of Jerusalem, but they are unjustified for Joseph's humble house, where similar textiles also

appear. However, I suggest that even in wealthy settings like the governor's and Herod's palaces, such textiles are also symbolic of the Incarnation as the ultimate mediation between humanity and divinity, since the Enrollment for Taxation and the Massacre of the Innocents fulfilled prophecies about the advent of the Messiah. The enrollment requirement forced Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, so that Christ was born in the ancestral hometown of David, as prophesied by Micah (5:1–2) and reiterated by Matthew (2:6).¹³⁰ This is clearly emphasized by the inscription of the scene: "because he was of the house and lineage of David. . . . To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being with child" (Luke 2:4–5).¹³¹ The Massacre of

128 Eastern lunette of the first bay and southern lunette of the sixth bay respectively: *ibid.*, 1:88–89, 98–99.

129 For a study of this mosaic as a reference to good government, relevant to Metochites's administrative role in the empire (including a discussion of his wealth and its sources), see R. S. Nelson, "Taxation with Representation: Visual Narrative and the Political Field of the Kariye Camii," *AH* 22, no. 1 (1999): 56–82. Nelson mentions comments made in the mid-fourteenth century by Alexios Makrembolites about the sumptuous textiles that the affluent inhabitants of Constantinople employed to dress their bodies and houses and flaunt their wealth (65).

130 The prophecy is also alluded to in Luke 2:4 and John 7:42.

131 Translation in Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:88. Interestingly, in the Enrollment for Taxation, the tree behind the red textile on the left end of the composition echoes the tree next to Mary to the



Fig. 26. Herod Orders the Massacre of the Innocents, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0321.

right. A similar tree appears in various scenes of her life and is occasionally interpreted by Underwood as a reference to the root (or tree) of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). (See Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:84, for the tree in the scene of Joseph Taking His Leave and Reproaching the Virgin.) Nelson points out that while this tree appears in multiple scenes in the series, it is here in the Taxation scene, where the inscription explicitly refers to Mary's pregnancy, that it "reaches its maximum height" (Nelson, "Taxation with Representation," 59). Another significant example is the tall and thin, rod-like tree that appears in the scene of the Virgin Entrusted to Joseph. Although Underwood does not read this tree as a reference to Jesse's root, he does relate Joseph's flowering rod in the same scene to Isaiah 11:1. The point to be made here is that if the tree motif is indeed a reference to Jesse's root in at least some Chora mosaics, then its proximity to the red textile in the Enrollment for Taxation taking place in Bethlehem (the homeland of Jesse and David) could further reinforce the hypothesis that this textile is also a symbol of the Incarnation through the Davidic bloodline. The taller of the two trees in this composition is behind Mary, and this proximity underlines its symbolic reference to the Incarnation, but the strategic placement of the second tree

the Innocents fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15, which is mentioned in Matthew 2:16–18. The first line of this gospel passage, which describes the massacre, is inscribed in the mosaic.¹³² In addition, this event prefigured the future sacrifice of the Logos incarnate, who took on human flesh so that his bodily veil could be torn on the cross. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the two symmetrically draped textiles on Herod's palace look like a cascading flow of blood, or a single textile torn in two.

I am not suggesting that all Byzantine viewers would have read these textiles in such a way, but I propose that we should consider the potential of such

could have been intended to reinforce the same meaning. For the symbolism of trees in Annunciation scenes (including its connection to Isaiah 11:1), see Papastavrou, *Annunciation*, 248–55.

132 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:98.

a reading in view of the visual context of the Chora images and the cultural context of Byzantine Constantinople, both thoroughly imbued with the concept of textile mediation in its various iterations. The following examples further support this approach by focusing on scenes from Christ's life.

The Life of Christ

Byzantine viewers wandering to the right of the esonarthex entrance to the nave, where Mary receives the heavenly bread, would encounter a number of significant textile-related images in the adjacent southern bay. The tent-like dome with Christ and a number of his male ancestors, starting with Adam, overshadows the image of Christ Chalkites (fig. 27).¹³³ As Rossitza Schroeder has observed, he is depicted in the unusual gesture of clasping his mantle (rather than holding a book), drawing attention to the textile's ability to act as a conduit of his healing power. This relates both to the miracle of the *haemorrhoussa* on the right pendentive above (fig. 28) and to the tradition of the image of Christ Chalkites healing members of the Komnenian dynasty through the miraculous power of the icon's veil.¹³⁴ I would also like to suggest that Christ's gesture underlines his own palpability and materiality as the Logos invested in the mantle of flesh.¹³⁵ His human nature makes him a benevolent and forgiving judge. His Incarnation sanctifies matter and allows it to mediate between humanity and divinity, exactly as his healing mantle did. In fact, Schroeder has suggested that this bay was a space of confession and penance, in which individual viewers were guided in their devotional practice by the praying Mary addressing Christ Chalkites and by the surrounding healing episodes of Christ's ministry, which reference faith and forgiveness as a path to bodily and spiritual transformation.¹³⁶

133 Ibid., 1:50–51.

134 Schroeder, "Prayer and Penance," 43–44.

135 This hypothesis is supported by Schroeder's observation that a similar gesture (Christ holding his mantle at the level of his waist with his left hand) is sometimes found in the iconography of the Doubting Thomas and in a miniature of the Chairete (Christ greeting the holy women after his resurrection) in an early fourteenth-century Constantinopolitan Tetraevangelion (Iveron 5, fol. 131v): both episodes focus on the palpability of Christ as the incarnated and resurrected Savior (in one case touched by Thomas, John 20:27; in the other by the two Marys, Matt. 28:9).

136 Schroeder, "Prayer and Penance," 45–48.

In this context, I believe we should explore other textile motifs as significant symbols that refer to the Incarnation, prayer, and salvation as powerful instances of mediation between humanity and divinity.

In the episode of the *haemorrhoussa*, a red textile is spread over the gated structure on the right, through which a number of men enter the scene and look intently toward Christ (fig. 28); perhaps the first of them is Jairus, who pleaded with Christ for the salvation of his daughter just before the *haemorrhoussa* touched Jesus.¹³⁷ The textile spread above the gated structure (perhaps Jairus's house?) may evoke the mediation of this man's petition as well as the ensuing salvation and protection granted to his household through the resurrection of his daughter, about to be fulfilled through the Logos incarnate. The mantle covering Jairus's body and praying hands is of a similar red color. This chromatic resonance might have been introduced to echo the connotations of entreaty and protection conveyed by the textile spread above the gated structure. Without this background fabric evoking an array of possible symbolic meanings, Jairus's red mantle would have been just another garment, intensely colored to give his figure prominence.

The red textile on the left side of the same scene could be an even more complex reference to mediation. Whether or not the single column next to it is a symbol of Christ,¹³⁸ the knotted red veil offers access to the golden background behind it, possibly alluding to the accessibility of divine light through the materiality of the fabric. This motif could therefore be a reference to the revelation of divinity through the body of Christ, much as Jesus's mantle and body reveal his divine power in the healing of the *haemorrhoussa*. In the polysemic language of Byzantine images, the knot could also be an apotropaic symbol (since it is known as such in other visual contexts) and therefore might further emphasize the concepts of protection and healing.¹³⁹ Alternatively,

137 Southeastern pendentive of the southern dome: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:146–47.

138 See n110 above.

139 For example, see I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "The Byzantine Knotted Column," in *Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos*, ed. S. Vryonis Jr. (Malibu, CA, 1985), 95–103; H. Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *DOP* 44 (1990): 216. As E. D. Maguire discusses in "Curtains at the Threshold: How They Hung and How They Performed," *DOP* 73 (2019): 217–243, veils



Fig. 27.
Deesis with Christ Chalkites
(bottom), healing miracles in the
pendentives and south dome with
Christ Pantokrator surrounded by
ancestors (top), Mary Fed by an
Angle (far left), ca. 1321; mosaic.
Esonarthex, Chora Monastery
(Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public domain;
photograph by Evren Kalinbacak /
Alamy Stock Photo.

the knot that binds the red veil could also symbolize the actual miracle taking place: the control of the flow of blood from which the *haemorrhoussa* was suffering.

that hang as curtains in front of architectural openings are often depicted knotted in Byzantine images to reflect actual practice, allowing light to stream into the spaces behind the curtains while maintaining some privacy by the divided upper part of the curtain. The lack of such a practical purpose in the depiction of the healing of the *haemorrhoussa* in the Chora, as there is no enclosed space on either side of the knotted veil, further emphasizes the symbolic significance of this motif.

Thanks to the flexibility of symbolic meaning-making (akin to the physical and semantic flexibility of textiles), this knotted red textile might be seen to bind together references to the healing body of Christ and the healed body of the woman. Their interaction is likewise mediated though a textile, the hem of Christ's garment, which offers a paradigm of divine revelation and salvation through the materiality of the Incarnation.

Opposite this scene, Christ appears healing a man who is identified by the inscription as blind and deaf. The miracle takes place beneath a prominent red



Fig. 28. Christ Healing the *Haemorrhoussa*, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Evren Kalinbacak / Alamy Stock Photo.

awning, which is tied between a fruitful tree and the single column of an architectural structure (fig. 29).¹⁴⁰ The patient does not correspond exactly to any specific case of healing mentioned in the Gospels, but could be emblematic of fallen humankind, unable to see and hear God.¹⁴¹ That spiritual affliction is cured through the Incarnation that renders the Logos visible, audible,

and palpable and allows him to sacrifice himself for the salvation of the world. The red textile under which the man gains his sight and hearing could be the symbol of the Incarnation that makes the Logos available as both God and man, bridging the heavenly and the earthly. The fruitful tree and column linked by the textile could both symbolize Christ, as the Tree of Life in paradise and as divine support in the earthly realm.¹⁴² Although

140 Southwestern pendentive of the esonarthex southern dome: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:142–44.

141 The inscription identifies the man as “τυφλὸν καὶ κωφόν,” i.e., blind and deaf/mute. Underwood (ibid., 1:143) is right to point out that the only man described as such in the Gospels (Matt. 12:22) is also said to be a demoniac, though neither the iconography nor the inscription of the Chora mosaic identify him as such, contrary to visualization of this passage in Byzantine illustrated manuscripts. Underwood takes the word κωφόν to mean just “mute,” but it can also mean “deaf,” and this seems to have been what the artist thought, since he depicted the man pointing at his ear (rather than his blind eyes, as Underwood suggests). Matthew 12:15 mentions the healing of several people without specifying their infirmities, and

therefore this mosaic could be a conflation of those cases with the blind and deaf demoniac.

142 On the symbolism of the column, see n109 above. The identification of Christ with the Tree of Life (ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς) is widespread in Byzantine literature. Through a sample search in the *TLG* for just three prominent authors, one finds ample evidence: Proclus of Constantinople (fifth century) refers to Christ as the Tree of Life or the life-giving fruit in his praises to Mary; Andrew of Crete (seventh to eighth century) interprets the Tree of Life mentioned in the book of Revelation as Christ; and Symeon of Thessalonike (fifteenth century) echoes Proclus but also identifies the saints with the fruits



Fig. 29. Christ Healing the Blind and Deaf Man, ca. 1321; mosaic. Esonarthex, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Evren Kalinbacak / Alamy Stock Photo.

of Christ, the Tree of Life. These references are not exhaustive for the relevant authors. Proclus, homily 4 (*On the Nativity*), 2, in Constat, *Proclus of Constantinople*, 228–29, lines 26–27, 31–32; *On the Holy Virgin Theotokos*, 17.13:4–6, in F. J. Leroy, *L'homilétique de Proclus de Constantinople* (Vatican City, 1967), 299–324. Andrew of Crete, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, homily 1.3, section 2.7:10–12; homily 23.26, section 22.2b:18–19 and 22.26:2/10–12; homily 24.71, section 22.14:5, in *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes*, vol. 1, *Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisareia: Text [und] Einleitung*, ed. J. Schmidt (Munich, 1955), 1–268. Symeon of Thessalonike, *Hymns*, section 1, hymn 13:54–57; section 6, hymn 5:121–22, hymn 18:62, hymn 24:57–59, in *Συμεών ἀρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης, τὰ λειτουργικά συγγράμματα, εὐχαὶ καὶ ᾠμοὶ*, ed. I. Phountoulas (Thessalonike, 1968), 75–266. The idea of Christ (or his cross) as the Tree of Life is widespread in Christianity: see e.g. J. Danielou, “La vigne et l’arbre de vie,” in idem, *Les symboles chrétiens primitifs* (Paris, 1961), 33–63; E. C. Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (Chicago, 1962); G. Dufour-Kowalska, *L’arbre de vie et la croix: Essai sur l’imagination visionnaire* (Geneva, 1985); J. D. M. Derrett, “Ὁ Κύριος ἐβασίλευσεν ἀπο τοῦ ξύλου,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 43, no. 4 (1989): 378–92; M. Schmidt, *Warum ein Apfel, Eva? Die Bildsprache von Baum, Frucht und Blume* (Regensburg,

the two linked entities could be interpreted in a number of ways,¹⁴³ their connection through the red fabric

2000), 19–36; and B. Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image* (Leiden, 2004). For scholarship that focuses on Byzantine material, see A. Iacobini, “L’albero della vita nell’immaginario medievale: Bisanzio e l’Occidente,” in *L’architettura medievale in Sicilia: La Cattedrale di Palermo*, ed. A. M. Romanini and A. Cadei (Rome, 1994), 241–90; A. G. Mantas, “The Iconographic Subject ‘Christ the Vine’ in Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art,” *ΔΧΑΕ* 24 (2003): 347–60.

143 For example, the fruitful tree might indicate the spiritual fruitfulness of humans (connected through the Incarnation/red fabric to the Logos incarnate as column). This spiritual fruitfulness could be conceptualized either as a human quality that prompted Jesus to reward the blind and deaf man with his physical healing (as Christ often states when he heals people to reward them for their faith), or as the condition that resulted from Christ’s healing miracle (the man was prompted to believe in Jesus as the Savior). According to Matthew 12:22–33, after Christ heals the blind and deaf demoniac, he enters into a discussion with the Pharisees and concludes: “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and

Fig. 30.
Christ Healing the Man
with the Withered Hand,
ca. 1321; mosaic.
Esonarthex, Chora
Monastery (Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork
in the public domain;
photograph provided by
Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees
for Harvard University,
Washington, DC, The
Byzantine Institute and
Dumbarton Oaks
Fieldwork Records and
Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s,
BF.S.1991.0453.



its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.” Either way, the fruitful tree in this healing scene (as well as in the adjacent scene of Christ Healing the Multitude or in the scene of Christ Healing Two Blind Men [Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 2:141, 135]) could carry a didactic message for Byzantine viewers, recalling the common motif of virtue as fruitfulness and suggesting that salvation depends not only on the Incarnation of God in Christ but also on the fruitful actions of his followers. On fruitful trees as symbols of virtue in Byzantine culture, see M. Evangelatou, “Word and Image in the *Sacra Parallela* (Codex Parisinus Graecus 923),” *DOP* 62 (2008): 127–28. Alternatively, the fruitful tree might evoke the beauties of God’s creation, which the formerly blind man can enjoy thanks to

might have been meant to reinforce their mutual reference to the Incarnation. The column on the left, for example, has a green shaft that echoes the green trunk of the tree on the right (the latter a rather unusual chromatic choice, since most trees in the Chora mosaics have brown or gray trunks that stand out from the foliage).

his miraculous healing; see the discussion in connection to similar references in Byzantine homilies by H. Maguire, “Rhetoric and Reality in the Art of the Kariye Camii,” in Klein, Ousterhout, and Pitarakis, *Kariye Camii Reconsidered*, 61–63.



Fig. 31.
Christ Healing Jairus's Daughter,
ca. 1321; wall painting.
Parekklesion, Chora Monastery
(Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey.
Artwork in the public domain;
photograph provided by
Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for
Harvard University, Washington,
DC, The Byzantine Institute and
Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork
Records and Papers, ca.
1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0135.

The visual effect creates a subtle parallel between tree and column, perhaps meant to suggest that both refer to the root of Jesse and therefore to Christ's Davidic royal ancestry.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, in this scene the red textile

144 According to Matthew 12:22–23, when Jesus healed the blind and deaf demoniac, the crowds were in awe of his power and wondered whether he was the son of David (i.e., the Messiah). For depictions of a tree or a column topped by a vase of flowers as a reference to the root of Jesse in Byzantine Annunciation images, see Papastavrou, "Le symbolisme de la colonne," 155–57, and eadem, *Annonciation*, 248–55, 280–81, 286. The only other tree with a green

trunk that I am aware of in the Chora mosaics appears in the scene of Christ Healing the Two Blind Men, opposite the Healing of the Blind and Deaf Man (northwestern pendentive of southern esonarthex dome: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:144–45, 2: pl. 135). The tree leans above the two blind men and toward Christ, who walks in its direction, as if Christ and the tree are in dialogue with each other, or are each other's counterparts (the blue foliage of the two fruitful trees in both of these scenes also creates a chromatic resonance with Christ's blue *himation*; for the colors see Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:144–45). It is possible that the tree in the Healing of the Two Blind Men also refers to Christ as the fruit of the Tree of Jesse. According to Matthew 20:29–34, the two blind men



Fig. 32. The Anastasis, ca. 1321; wall painting. Parekklesion, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, B.F.S.1991.0106.

is unusually luxurious, decorated with a broad golden band and tassels; as it billows above the figures in a vault-like shape, it creates the impression of a protective and regal canopy under which the heavenly king, born from an earthly royal bloodline, meets and heals his people.¹⁴⁵

On the vault below the pendentive with the *haemorrhoussa*, Christ heals the man with the withered hand in front of a structure that towers behind Jesus and recedes in the background, appearing to be much lower behind the afflicted man (fig. 30).¹⁴⁶ As Christ and the

patient extend their right hands toward each other in a powerful gesture of mediation, the building and the red veil spread on top of it seem to visualize the same idea: the textile appears to bridge the height of God and the lowliness of humankind, evoking the Incarnation. Interestingly, the inscription IC XC, the standard abbreviation for “Jesus Christ,” does not appear next to Christ’s head, as it usually does, but is placed above the red fabric, as if naming *it* in addition to Jesus.

Similarly evocative is the composition of the healing of Jairus’s daughter in the parekklesion (fig. 31).¹⁴⁷ The red drapery linking the two buildings that frame the composition echoes the curve articulated by the

addressed Christ as the “son of David,” and therefore a descendant of Jesse.

145 See n77 above for the use of canopies by the emperor and other members of the imperial family of the Palaiologoi.

146 Eastern soffit of the southernmost arch. Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:147–48. The building probably represents the synagogue

inside which the miracle took place (Matt. 12:9–13, Mark 3:1–5, Luke 6:6–10).

147 Southern soffit of the arch in front of the parekklesion apse: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:197–98.



Fig. 33. Kosmas “the Poet,” ca. 1321; wall painting. Parekklesion, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Ivan Vdovin / Alamy Stock Photo.

joined arms of Christ and the girl, as Jesus reaches out and brings her back to life in response to her father’s faithful plea. The chromatic resonance between the girl’s tunic and the textile above—both of which are red with yellow bands—visually reinforces the conceptual connection between the fabric and the miracle taking place below it. Jairus is also dressed in a similar shade of red, connecting his petition both to the figure of his daughter and to the fabric above. The textile narrates in the polysemic language of symbols the action that is performed through the veil of Christ’s body: a communion between divinity and humanity, a transmission of healing and life-giving energy, an offering of shelter and salvation. Both the textile and the gesture of Christ, who grasps the wrist of Jairus’s daughter, prefigure the miracle of the Anastasis in the apse to the left (fig. 32). Here, Christ grabs Adam and Eve by their wrists, his bodily veil shining in the light of his divinity as he mends the broken link between God

and his people and offers the promise of eternal life.¹⁴⁸ In this climactic episode, only two figures are prominently dressed in red clothes: the human foremother Eve and the royal forefather Solomon, who appears to the left, behind Adam, alongside two other kings. Eve’s *maphorion* (very much like the one donned by the Theotokos) and Solomon’s chlamys remind the viewers of the human and royal blood with which Mary wove the mantle of flesh for her divine son.¹⁴⁹

148 Ibid., 1:192–95.

149 All three of the depicted kings wear red garments, but Solomon’s chlamys is the most visible: his father David dons a red belt, and the king behind and between the two wears a red tunic. All three wear red and golden boots. Red is clearly associated here with royalty, as is also the case with the royal ancestors of Christ on the northern esonarthex dome (Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:53–54). Red is the royal color in late Byzantium according to Macrides, Munitiz, and Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos*, 354.



Fig. 34. The Installation of the Ark in the Holy of Holies (left); Isaiah Prophesying about the Angel Smiting the Assyrians before the Gate of Jerusalem (right), ca. 1321; wall painting. Parekklesion, Chora Monastery (Kariye Camii), Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. 1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0100.

The parekklesion also contains images that allude to Mary's role in the Incarnation. They include prominent textiles that echo the symbolic fabrics in the scenes from Christ's life discussed above. A case worthy of mention is the four hymnographers, each flanked by buildings covered with red textiles, in the pendentives under the parekklesion dome (fig. 33).¹⁵⁰ In their

hymns to Mary, they praise her as the instrument of the Incarnation and as the mediatrix, the most powerful intercessor of humanity, able to protect and offer refuge. Their hymns also function as prayers of thanksgiving and entreaty, and they relate to the funerary rite, when Mary's role as Theotokos and mediatrix is

150 Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:217–22. The four hymnographers are John of Damascus (d. 749), Cosmas of Maiuma (eighth century),

Joseph the Hymnographer (d. 886), and Theophanes Graptos of Nicea (d. 845).



Fig. 35.
Three Priests before the Altar,
ca. 1321; wall painting.
Parekklesion, Chora
Monastery (Kariye Camii),
Istanbul, Turkey. Artwork in
the public domain;
photograph provided by
Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees
for Harvard University,
Washington, DC, The
Byzantine Institute and
Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork
Records and Papers, ca.
1920s–2000s, BF.S.1991.0139.

particularly relevant.¹⁵¹ In other words, their hymns are dynamic acts of mediation between petitioner and provider, their ultimate goal being protection and salvation. The textiles draped on the buildings behind them likewise shelter human space, mediating between the earthly and heavenly realms, while also alluding to the materiality and reality of the Incarnation that made salvation possible.

151 See *ibid.*, 1:217–19; Akyürek, “Funeral Ritual in the Parekklesion”; and Gerstel, “The Chora Parekklesion.”

Below the hymnographers, two scenes depicting Solomon’s Temple include a billowing, vault-like red textile spread between two separate architectural structures, hovering above the ark and the altar (figs. 34–35).¹⁵² These scenes prefigure the Virgin as the

152 Northern soffit of western arch, identified by Underwood as Aaron and His Sons before the Altar: Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:235–37, 3:236. Ousterhout notes that the inscription mentions the burnt offering to be made on the altar as described in Ezekiel 43:27 (referring to the Temple); he identifies the scene as Three Priests before the Altar: Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 74. Right half

living Temple of God. In addition, in the Chora mosaics, Mary is hailed as a descendant not only of Solomon, the king who built the Temple, but also of Aaron and the line of high priests who served at the Temple altar.¹⁵³ Whether or not the fabric in the two Temple wall paintings is meant as a reference to the veil of the Holy of Holies, it appears prominent in the sacred spaces that marked the presence of God among his people in the Old Testament and prefigured his Incarnation through Mary in the New Testament. In both cases, the red textile is aligned with the segment of heaven and rays of light that visualize the presence of God, and it shares the same red color with the fabric covering the altar. It seems reasonable to assume that in this iconographic context such prominent textiles would have carried symbolic significance in the eyes of Byzantine viewers; and like the other textiles discussed above, they could have been associated with the Incarnation as the investiture of the Logos in the mantle of human flesh woven by the Virgin.

Mediating Hope in an Era of Crisis

Although the above analysis is by no means exhaustive, it traces some consistent threads throughout the iconographic program of the Chora and points toward plausible symbolic readings for its recurring textile motifs. In the last two sections of this essay, I would like to return to questions relevant to the broader cultural context of such images in order to shed further light on the meaning of the Chora material. I again use the term “background textiles” as a convenient shorthand for all the fabrics depicted between or on top of various structures in late Byzantine religious scenes. Often such textiles are very much in the foreground, or in a very prominent position, occasionally even dominating the

composition. The term “background textiles” should not be taken as an indication of secondary or marginal importance, as I believe they were intended to make a significant contribution to the meaning of individual scenes and entire cycles. “Background” rather refers to the fact that such textiles are part of the architectural or natural setting, as the background or framework of the action, complementing the meaning of the protagonists’ actions.

The overall visual context of the Chora scenes discussed above—their subject matter, composition, and iconographic details—suggests that textiles were purposefully employed as polysemic symbols of mediation, especially focusing on the Incarnation and human salvation as pivotal moments of mediation between God and his people, achieved through Mary and Christ. Given the polyvalence of images, symbols, and textiles in Byzantium, it is likely that the commissioner, artists, and viewers of these works would have applied a variety of potential interpretations to the background textiles that proliferate in the Chora images. This polyvalence is entirely in keeping with the theological and intellectual sophistication of Byzantine culture. It is that sophistication, coupled with the prominence of textiles of mediation in all aspects of sociocultural interaction, that should predispose us to read representations of fabrics as multilayered signifiers capable of unveiling a range of possible meanings that can significantly enrich our understanding of Byzantine imagery in its original context. Ironically, the ubiquity of textiles spread across architectural backgrounds in late Byzantine images seems to have rendered them invisible to our modern eyes. However, visual or textual statements become topoi exactly because they are meaningful in the context that generates them, not because they are ossified, empty gestures, void of meaning.

We can therefore imagine that the iconographic motif of background textiles became so popular in late Byzantium because of its rich potential of signification. But why was the prominent use of this motif such a late development, given that textile mediation was central in Byzantine culture all along, and that textiles had for centuries served as symbols of the Incarnation in textual, visual, and ritual contexts? I have not attempted to trace precedents of background textiles in earlier periods, although they certainly exist. What sets the background textiles of the late Byzantine era apart is not their novelty but their unprecedented

of southern lunette beneath the dome: Installation of the Ark in the Holy of Holies (of Solomon’s Temple): Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:231–32; 3:234.

153 David and Solomon, as well as Aaron and Moses, are included in Christ’s genealogy in the northern dome of the Chora esonarthex (with the medallion of Mary and Christ in the middle). Although a bloodline connection between Aaron and Christ is not explicit in the Bible, it became integrated into the Byzantine tradition. See Underwood, *Kariye Djami*, 1:50, 53–54. Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 74, notes that the three priests making an offering at the altar resemble iconographically the three Magi from Christ’s Nativity.

popularity.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, we should consider how other fundamental aspects of late Byzantine life might relate to the meaning of textiles and their employment in religious imagery. I argue that the political, military, and economic crisis that led to the gradual disintegration of the Byzantine empire in the course of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries is relevant in two main ways. First, it caused economic pressures and gradual material impoverishment, factors that could have intensified the value of textiles as social and cultural agents in both economic and ideological terms. Second, it generated psychological anxiety about the survival of institutions and individuals that increased the fervor of entreaties for salvation in this life or the next—entreaties addressed to Christ, his mother, and his saints.¹⁵⁵ In this context, background textiles might have become particularly popular because they could highlight with special eloquence that fervent plea for divine assistance: they were palpably emblematic of protection, safety, and prosperity, and they symbolized the reality and materiality of the Incarnation as the union between God and his people and as the path to salvation. Such meanings could always be relevant in

the reading of textiles in Byzantine iconography (and in the eyes of a broader Eastern Orthodox audience, not restricted to the subjects of the Byzantine emperor), but perhaps they became particularly acute and resonant in Asia Minor and the Balkans in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, a period marked by recurring wars, raids, plague outbreaks, the growing infiltration of Latins and Turks, and the gradual conquest of the region by the latter.¹⁵⁶

The development of the iconography of the Koimesis (the Dormition of Mary) in the late Byzantine period could perhaps be considered an analogous phenomenon to that of the widespread popularity of background textiles: the extensive cycles that are dedicated to the Koimesis in this period, and the crowds of human and angelic attendants that accompany the Virgin, emphasize her powerful role as Theotokos and mediatrix. Such concepts had been prominent for centuries in the Byzantine church, but became even more relevant amid the crisis of the late period—so much so that, by decree of Emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos, the entire month of August was dedicated to the celebration of Mary's Dormition.¹⁵⁷ The liturgical and visual emphasis on the Koimesis might be said to reflect and promote the anxious plea for protection that Orthodox Christians addressed to the Theotokos in those troubled times, for in their belief system she carried special favor with and had unique access to God. Such connections between religious iconography and the historical and political concerns of the time are in fact a prominent

154 The striking proliferation of this motif in late Byzantine visual production is noted by Mouriki, *Τοιχογραφίες του Σωτήρα* (see n92).

155 The economic situation in Asia Minor and the Balkans fluctuated greatly from place to place over the course of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, and I am not suggesting a homogenous trend toward decline, although such a process became more evident from the second half of the fourteenth century onward for territories under Byzantine control. In any case, textile production and use were basic indicators for the state of local economies at the time. Evidence suggests that besides the widespread domestic production of fabrics for household use, Byzantine commercial textile production survived only on a limited scale in a few urban centers and generally declined under the pressure of Italian imports. At the same time, the commercial production of raw materials still continued in Byzantine territories and was largely absorbed by the Italian textile economy. In such a context, textiles were clearly understood as precious commodities, either as luxury goods and status markers or as everyday necessities. For the above see A. E. Laiou, ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century*, 3 vols. (Washington, DC, 2002), esp. eadem, "The Agrarian Economy, 13th–15th Centuries," 1:311–75; K.-P. Matschke, "The Late Byzantine Urban Economy, 13th–15th Centuries," 2:463–93; and idem, "Commerce, Trade, Markets, and Money, 13th–15th Centuries," 2:771–80. See also Nelson, "Taxation with Representation," 63–66, for a vivid description of the economic, military, and social crises affecting the Byzantine empire at the time of Metochites, and the importance of textiles as markers of wealth and status among affluent Constantinopolitans in the mid-fourteenth century.

156 See the literature mentioned in the previous note, especially Laiou, "Agrarian Economy" and Nelson, "Taxation with Representation," 63–66. Nelson (68, 75–76) has also related various scenes of the Chora (especially the "good and bad government" scenes in the exonarthex, i.e., the Enrollment for Taxation and the scenes with Herod, especially the Massacre of the Innocents) to the historical conditions of the fourteenth century and to Metochites's own concerns regarding safety, which are also reflected in the restoration of the Chora as his refuge.

157 See Ware, "Dormition of the Holy Virgin," 219–54, esp. 220–21, 228–29. For the theology of the Dormition and its visual representation, see also M. Evangelatou, "The Symbolism of the Censer in Byzantine Representations of the Dormition of the Virgin," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Aldershot, UK, 2005), 117–25, with references to further literature.

feature of Byzantine visual production, as Nelson points out in his discussion of the Chora mosaics.¹⁵⁸

This historico-political explanation for the widespread popularity of background textiles in the late Byzantine period is a plausible hypothesis, but nothing more than that. Interpretations of specific examples of this theme stand on firmer ground and provide more solid results when performed in the manner I have proposed above, with attention to three successive layers of context: the iconographic content of each scene; the wider visual, liturgical, and microhistorical context in which that scene appears (such as the entire church in the case of murals, or the entire codex in the case of miniatures, and their respective producers and viewers/users); and the much broader context of the surrounding culture, its values, and its traditions. The meaning of background textiles shifts from case to case depending on the variability of the first two contexts and the diverse interactions of patrons, image-makers, and viewers within all three contexts. In this essay, I began with a cultural investigation of textiles, as I believe that their dynamic function as mediators in Byzantine society would have informed their use and reception in the specific contexts of the Chora imagery and its individual scenes. Below I would like to briefly explore some additional aspects of textile culture in Byzantium that could have informed the reception of background textiles, and touch on the question of the shifting perceptions of viewers.

The Labor of Material and Spiritual Mediation: Textile Production and Productiveness

For a better understanding of background textiles, it is crucial that we bear in mind how labor-intensive the production of fabric was in Byzantium.¹⁵⁹ Today, those

158 Nelson, "Taxation with Representation," esp. 77–78, 82n107. He points out that "according to a long-standing Byzantine tradition," religious narratives "were political at the same time." The increased dedication of funerary chapels and the heightened sense of anxiety about forgiveness in the afterlife that is evident in late Byzantine letters, poems, and eulogies have also been attributed to the psychological strain experienced by the Byzantines due to the turbulent conditions of the late period. See Gerstel, "Chora Parekklesion," 136–37.

159 On the significance of labor in relation to material culture and human experience, see P. Gose, "Labor and the Materiality of the Sign: Beyond Dualist Theories of Culture," *Dialectical Anthropology* 13 (1989): 103–21. B. Femenías, "In Cloth We Trust," *Reviews in*

of us living in industrial and affluent societies mostly buy prefabricated clothes and textile furnishings, and we remain unaware of the hard labor still involved in their production. In the case of natural fibers, the long process starts by cultivating and harvesting primary materials of animal or plant origin, which are subsequently treated, spun, and woven into fabrics in industrial facilities or processed by hand, depending on the provenance and type of textile. Textiles are then laboriously transformed into clothing for our bodies and houses, often in sweatshops beyond the borders of our countries, and then shipped to nearby stores or purchased online.¹⁶⁰

In Byzantium, all this labor was not only highly visible but also much more difficult and time-consuming, due to the lack of industrial means of production and transportation.¹⁶¹ On the microeconomic level of household management, textile production was highly gendered, since the process of spinning thread and weaving fabrics was the work of women.¹⁶² Even in wealthy households, all women (and not just the servants) were expected to know and practice such activities, since spinning and weaving were also emblematic of female virtue, which was defined in terms of industry, discipline, and modesty, and was upheld through household seclusion.¹⁶³ The domestic production of

Anthropology 39, no. 4 (2010): 258–87, emphasizes the importance of labor in the study of textiles (see esp. 279).

160 For an overview of textile production today see S. Kadolph, *Textiles* (Harlow, UK, 2014), and V. Hencken Elsasser, *Textiles: Concepts and Principles* (New York, 2015).

161 For the extensive labor involved in the production of Byzantine silks, see A. Muthesius, "Essential Processes, Looms, and Technical Aspects of the Production of Silk Textiles," in Laiou, *Economic History of Byzantium*, 1:147–68. For a broader overview of medieval textile production see D. Cardon, *La draperie au Moyen Âge: Essor d'une grande industrie européenne* (Paris, 1999).

162 For references to the extensive literature on the subject see Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 286n121. See also S. E. J. Gerstel, *Rural Lives and Landscapes in Late Byzantium: Art, Archaeology, and Ethnography* (New York, 2015), 94–95. For the broader medieval European context, see R. M. Karras, "'This Skill in a Woman Is By No Means to Be Despised': Weaving and the Gender Division of Labor in the Middle Ages," in Burns, *Medieval Fabrications*, 89–104, and C. H. Berman, "Women's Work in Family, Village, and Town after 1000 CE: Contributions to Economic Growth?," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 10–32.

163 See Evangelatou, "Threads of Power," 293 and n156 for relevant literature and sources. See also Fulghum, "Under Wraps," 23. For a discussion of the earliest images of Mary spinning and their

textiles ensured that everyone was aware of the hard labor involved in their making and therefore appreciated their value. Thus textiles were much more noticeable (one might say, much more visible) to Byzantine eyes than they are to the eyes of those among us who take them for granted as effortlessly and cheaply available. Textiles were a much more precious commodity in comparison to our contemporary standards, as is evident from their frequent mention in Byzantine dowries and wills.¹⁶⁴

The laborious and costly *material* production of textiles in turn made them *conceptually* productive: their material value reinforced their ideological value in the fluid world of meaning-making outlined above. Here, it is productive to think of material value not only in abstract monetary terms but also in terms of corporeal experiences such as physical effort, time investment, bodily comfort and protection, embodied identity, and status. Such elements of material value relate to both the production and consumption of textiles, and indicate that their physical and ideological mediation were inextricably linked. We must keep in mind these corporeal, embodied experiences of material and ideological value when we interpret representations of textiles in Byzantine visual culture. We should further consider that for many people in Byzantium, not only the use and consumption but also the production of textiles was intimately and intensely experienced in sensorial and bodily terms. This means that in the Byzantine world textiles were not only highly visible but also relatable and meaningful in ways that could be deeply personal and vary significantly from one viewer to another and at different points in their lives.

Such variability in viewers' responses to textiles was inevitable, even if their perceptions were conditioned by widespread cultural values and practices. In the case of the Chora, a church that even in its name emphatically evokes the mystery of the Incarnation through Mary and Christ,¹⁶⁵ it is highly likely that the primary idea guiding the interpretation of the background textiles was the concept of the Incarnation—the

investiture of the Logos in the mantle of human flesh prepared by his mother, as the pathway to human salvation. This idea was continuously reiterated in Byzantine hymns and homilies used in church rituals and feasts, and was visually echoed in depictions of the Annunciation, where Mary's spinning of the purple thread symbolized the weaving of her son's body, initiated in the moment of the angelic greeting, which mediated the reunion of God and his people.¹⁶⁶ It is very possible that this textile-centered narrative of salvation would have been evoked in the minds of Byzantine viewers when they saw background textiles like those in the Chora mosaics.¹⁶⁷ It could be said that those textiles structured the narrative of the Incarnation: they punctuated and highlighted the visual text, and maintained a common narrative thread throughout the program.¹⁶⁸ They created evocative resonances between different elements within particular scenes and across different scenes, in a manner similar to the metric and vocal resonances in the verses of Byzantine hymns that underlined conceptual connections between the mystery of

166 See n35 above. The Annunciation was probably depicted in the nave of the Chora church, but unfortunately most of the mosaic decoration of that space no longer survives.

167 Most visual narratives in late Byzantine churches are dedicated to the Incarnation, and therefore background textiles in them could be read in the way proposed for the Chora mosaics, although specific details and emphases would vary. In addition, there are also cycles of saints' lives that display such textiles, in which case our interpretation should shift, but still consider the role of textiles as mediators in Byzantine culture. Textile motifs could, for instance, evoke the power of the saints to serve as mediators by interceding on behalf of the faithful. In some cases, such background textiles also create links to other cycles in the same church that focus on or allude to the Incarnation; these details might aim to present the honored saint as an imitator of Christ—one who through his work and sacrifice serves the purpose of the Incarnation, i.e., human salvation. Consider, for example, the *vita* scenes of St. Nicholas in the fourteenth-century monastery of St. Demetrios in the village of Markova Sušica (just outside of Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia), which was patronized by Prince Marko: L. Mirković, *Markov manastir* (Novi Sad, Serbia, 1925). The prominent background textiles in this cycle resonate with those in the Akathistos scenes and with the liturgical veils handled by angels in scenes of the Divine Liturgy (all three cycles juxtaposed on the same eastern wall). I thank Ivan Drpić for sharing with me photographic material that allowed me to make these observations. I hope to discuss this case in more detail in a future publication.

168 Textiles can also serve as devices of narrative structure in *vita* cycles.

references to existing traditions of matronage and domesticity see C. G. Taylor, *Late Antique Images of the Virgin Annunciate Spinning: Allotting the Scarlet and the Purple* (Leiden, 2018).

164 See the evidence discussed in M. Parani, "Curtains in the Middle and Late Byzantine House," *DOP* 73 (2019): 145–164.

165 Ousterhout, "Virgin of the Chora," 92–93, 100–101.

the Incarnation and human salvation.¹⁶⁹ The recurring background textiles could lead the viewers to explore the details of the visual narrative while always keeping in mind its essence, the hope for human salvation through Mary and Christ—a hope that in the late Byzantine period was becoming an increasingly desperate and urgent plea.

Those same textiles that provided a framework for a theologically charged reading of Mariological and Christological narratives could also prompt personal connections between the viewers and the sacred stories. We can never recuperate such personal responses, but the potential of textiles to accommodate and activate them might have been another reason for their widespread popularity in late Byzantine religious scenes. Considering the wide range of viewers in a number of churches (and not just the Chora), we might come up with several hypothetical yet plausible scenarios. Perhaps a merchant who had made his fortune through the textile trade or who advertised his wealth and social status through conspicuous textile consumption would be particularly inclined to see in the background textiles of late Byzantine paintings the honor and renewed status of grace bestowed on human nature through the Incarnation of God. A sailor whose life depended on the sails of his ship, a soldier who associated camp tents with security, or a beggar who didn't even have a warm mantle on his back might have favored notions of protection and salvation when seeing billowing canopies in scenes that hail Mary as the Theotokos or present Christ performing healing miracles. A courtier or a servant involved in the handling of imperial textiles and the decoration of the palace or the city with special fabrics on ceremonial occasions might have read background textiles as references to the *adventus* or presence of the heavenly king among his people. A priest who handled the liturgical veils that concealed and revealed the Eucharistic gifts might have centered his interpretation on notions of mystery and divine ineffability. A young bride, having recently celebrated her nuptials dressed or even veiled in red, might have been especially likely to read the red textiles spread behind or above

169 In particular I have in mind the lexical, vocal, and metric resonances of the Akathistos hymn, which includes many verses meant to work in pairs that reinforce each other's meaning. See, e.g., *oikoi* 5.6–7, 7.8–9, 17.6–7, 17.8–9, 17.10–11, 19.6–7, 21.10–11, 21.12–13, 21.16–17, 23.10–11, 23.12–13, 23.16–17 (Peltomaa, *Akathistos*, 2–19).

the Theotokos as references to her status as the bride of God. A woman toiling daily on her loom and tracing the sign of the cross countless times as she interwove the vertical warp with the horizontal weft might have been inclined to read background textiles as symbols of the heavy labor and sacrifice of Mary and Christ that made human salvation possible.

Any of these interpretations might have occurred to various viewers, regardless of gender, social standing, or economic circumstances; and their reading of the material would have shifted from scene to scene and from day to day, subject to cultural stimuli and personal experiences. We might hypothesize that Theodore Metochites, a wealthy and successful court dignitary who in his writings reveals an acute preoccupation with the uncertainties of life and a yearning for safety and salvation, might have read the background textiles depicted in his church—especially those in the funerary parekklesion—in terms of both honor and protection.¹⁷⁰ His yearning would have been even stronger after he fell into disgrace and spent the last two years of his life in involuntary confinement at the Chora, from where he could see the ruins of his family palace and reminisce about his past glories.¹⁷¹ In addition, as somebody who had labored hard in his life to climb the social ladder and achieve a sense of security that proved to be all too fleeting, he could probably appreciate the reference of background textiles to the labor and sacrifice of the Incarnation.

Indeed, Byzantine viewers' awareness of textile production as extremely laborious might have made background textiles particularly effective symbols of the Incarnation. The investiture of the Logos in human flesh humbled and even humiliated the divine as much as it exalted and honored the human; it led Christ to live among the poor and suffer an excruciating death,

170 Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 110–17, 125. Ousterhout notes that Metochites often stated in his own writings that “salvation lies in safety”; he connects this preoccupation with the humiliation Metochites experienced in his youth when his family was exiled due to his father's heretical convictions (122). See also Nelson's comments about Metochites's anxieties and their manifestation in the Chora program, in n156 above.

171 Ousterhout, *Art of the Kariye Camii*, 121. Metochites fell from grace when his imperial patron Andronikos II was deposed by his grandson Andronikos III in 1328. Metochites was first exiled in Didymoteichon; in 1330 he was allowed to return to Constantinople and retire as monk Theoleptos in the Chora Monastery, where he died in 1332.

while his mother shared in the hardships and pain of his life. Both the Theotokos and Jesus experienced the Incarnation as intense labor, pain, and suffering that made them compassionate toward the human plight for forgiveness and protection. Their followers also had to toil and labor, both physically and spiritually, through ceaseless devotion, prayer, fasting, and moral vigilance in order to maintain the newfound bond between divinity and humanity that the Incarnation established. In Byzantine culture, textiles were apt symbols of the laborious contact between God and his people, precisely because they vividly embodied both the notion of labor and that of protection.

Textiles had an immense potential for signification in Byzantium, so much so that they ultimately functioned as dynamic mnemonic devices, fostering creative memory rather than a rigid recollection of previously memorized “readings.” In other words, rather than encompassing a set number of meanings, textiles could function as stepping stones, aiding viewers to generate a range of complementary and open-ended interpretations depending on the context.¹⁷² Especially in the realm of

religious experiences, which took shape at the intersection of cultural forces and personal voices, textile mediation was truly transformative. It could metamorphose the unknown into the familiar, the ordinary into the exceptional, the mundane into the sacred, the holy into the approachable, and the mysterious into the palpable and believable, even as it remained mysterious and awe-inspiring. This shape-shifting liminality, this ability of textiles to weave together the ordinary and the extraordinary and to underline and collapse the boundaries between them, is another reason they were such eloquent symbols of the Incarnation: the mystery through which God was humbled so that humanity could be exalted, the mystery through which divine power was simultaneously concealed and revealed by the mantle of human flesh. Indeed, being liminal, the fabric of the Incarnation highlighted not only the phenomenon of mediation, but the very notion of mystery. This is something we should keep in mind when trying to unpack the meanings of background textiles in late Byzantine paintings; after all, one of their references could be to meanings hidden and obscure rather than fully explored and understood, as Symeon of Thessalonike might have pointed out.

172 See Lidov, “The Temple Veil,” 104: “Most probably, Byzantine image makers deliberately avoided limiting the all-embracing symbolism of the veil to a particular pattern but rather used it as a recognizable paradigm appearing each time in a new form.” For memory and remembering as creative processes in medieval culture (focusing on western Europe but with insights relevant to Byzantine culture as well), see M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990), 1–4; M. Carruthers and J. M. Ziolkowski, *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia, 2002), 1–4. Also consider what Douglas Davies says about the creative power of symbols that offer

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“an increasingly deep pool of potential meanings available for exploitation by future interpreters” (n57 above).

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